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The Long Haired 'Pards; OR, The Tartars of the Plains.

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AUTHOR OF "THREE-FINGERED JACK," ETC.

CHAPTER I. A FRONTIER FESTIVAL.

"MAKES a feller 'most sorry fer the old Injun fashion, eh, pard? I can't say as I ever hankered after the wimmen critters—they're most gen'ally bad medicine, an' they ain't many lodges big enough to hold them an' luck, too, to my notion; but when I fust lay eyes on her, I hed to fight mighty hard inside myself to keep from snatchin' her up an' makin' a tail-on-end race fer it—I did so!"

"There's another man who thinks much the same, or his eyes speak false," quietly remarked the young man addressed, with a slight nod toward the small, flag-draped platform or pavilion. "He must be a new-comer, for I never saw him before."

"They ain't many men as care to see him

twicet. Take a good squar' look an' see what you kin make out from his face."

The speakers—who are destined to figure prominently in this chronicle—were standing a little apart from the main gathering, and both were men who would attract attention in any crowd, though strong contrasts in nearly every respect.

The first speaker was scarcely of medium height; his limbs were small, but admirably rounded, and though at first glance he seemed almost effeminate, his strength, activity and wonderful skill in almost every species of athletics had long since passed into a proverb. His features were clear-cut and regular, and would have been fairly handsome only for the high cheekbones. His face was smooth and beardless, though the hair of his head was unusually heavy, falling in straight black masses below his shoulders. His eyes, though rather small, were wonderfully bright and keen, and few men could meet them fairly without an uncomfortable feeling of being read through and through.

His garments were almost severely plain, of Indian-tanned buck-skin, and minus all the fringes and beadings most men of his class are so fond of. Even his weapons were unornamented.

Yet one object about him shone and sparkled in the sunlight: a beautifully-embroidered and ornamented pouch hung upon his breast—a "medicine-sack."

Such was William—or "BILL COMSTOCK," the scout and guide. His career, though briefer, was no less famous than that of Wild Bill or Buffalo Bill, and to this day many a rough voice grows soft, many a hard eye dims, as the memory of the true-hearted scout is recalled to mind. True as steel to a friend—bitter as death to an enemy, he died in harness, nobly performing his duty; and now lies in a nameless grave. Peace to his ashes!

His companion—known far and wide as "Happy Jack"—was rising six feet, broad-shouldered, full-chested, with a round, compact waist, swelling hips and long limbs; a model of manly strength and symmetry. His complexion was fair, his features almost classically regular, his eyes large and deep blue. A heavy mustache shaded his lips, while a magnificent chevelure hung in yellow curls to his shoulders. His dress, like that of his partner, was mainly of buck-skin, and bore traces of recent hard riding and rough living.

"Unless my eyes deceive me," he said, after a steady gaze in the direction indicated by



"THAT'S ENOUGH, PARD!" CRIED HAPPY JACK. "YOU MEAN WELL, BUT I DON'T NEED ANY MAN TO FIGHT MY BATTLES."

Comstock, "that man is what you rarely see—a brave tyrant. God help the man—or woman—whose only hope is in his mercy!"

"I knowed you'd see it," laughed the scout, softly. "That's Cap'n Stone, of the —th. He led his men sech a dog's life that his fri'nds managed to git him changed to this rijiment. I don't reckon he'd 'a' lived through the next scrimmage—indeed, the boys didn't make no secret of it, but said right out that he'd die from ahind, the very fust chainte that come."

"He doesn't look like a man who would run from even such a danger," thoughtfully said Happy Jack.

"No more he would—without a fa'r cause," grinned Comstock, nodding toward the pavilion. "To do him jestice, they ain't a more dare-devil man, nur a better Injun-fighter than him. But thar's the little gal kin take him into camp!"

"I feel sorry for her," was the scout's only reply.

The subject of this brief conversation was seated beside a lady near the upper end of the pavilion. Tall, well-proportioned, dark and handsome, a finely-educated man with rare conversational powers, Captain Lawrence Stone was laying himself out to please the young lady beside him with an interest and ardor that he made no attempt to disguise from the eyes of those around. Indeed, so impressive did his air become that the lady arose and hastily approached the edge of the pavilion nearest the crowd. Captain Stone followed, a hot flush passing swiftly across his brow.

The unpolished though sincere praise of the scout had not been unfounded. Kate Markham, daughter of the colonel commanding, was indeed a beautiful woman. That she was barely up to the middle hight, that her form was full and admirably symmetrical without being too plump, that she was a perfect brunette, with jetty-black hair, clear complexion, rosebud mouth and large, brilliant eyes; all this is easily said, but the words give only a faint and unsatisfactory idea of the reality. With each passing mood she seemed quite a different person—alike only in being charming, bewitching in all.

The hot blood mantled her cheek as she felt the presence of the captain at her elbow, and as though dreading what he might intend saying, she hastily uttered:

"Pray—who is that gentleman talking to father?"

"Gentleman?" echoed Captain Stone, with a scarcely-disguised sneer. "Ah, perhaps you mean yonder fellow with the long hair?"

"I mean the gentleman with the golden curls—yes," replied Kate, with a provoking emphasis.

"That is Happy Jack, as men call him, a sort of scout, or camp-follower, I believe. I fear though, Miss Kate, that few would recognize him by your description."

"Indeed! after such a proof of your blindness, I shall think twice before believing any more of your pretty speeches. Without exception he is the handsomest man I have seen in a year—and I'm going to ask papa for an introduction."

With a mischievous laugh, Kate Markham ran lightly down the broad steps and approached her parent; but if she really had such an idea, it was frustrated. With a military salute the scout turned away and rejoined his partner.

Colonel Markham greeted his petted—if not spoiled—child with a sunny smile that partly betrayed the deep, almost passionate love he felt for her. Another proof was to be read in the unwonted surroundings; in the draped pavilion, the gay and animated crowd, in the military band now discoursing their best music, in the soldiers who had passed in stately review before the stand, each saluting the laughing, nodding and excited little beauty; all this, and all that was yet to come, was in honor of her eighteenth birthday. There was to be a general holiday—all who chose were to meet on an equal footing in the games of strength and skill, for the victors in which suitable prizes had been provided.

"Now that I have made my report, suppose you give me an idea of what all this *fanfare-andade* means?" said Happy Jack, as he rejoined his friend, Comstock.

"It's fer her, pard. She come out here—from somewhar in the States, I reckon, whar she's bin to school, or sich like. She come out here a week ago, an' the old man he 'lowed he'd show how proud he was, by givin' a ginewine prairie circus. I reckon everybody an' his yaller dog'll be here. They's money in it, too, lettin' alone the fun. The old man don't often git off 'm his reg'lar beat, but when he do, he jist spreads hisself wide open—you hear me?" and the enthusiastic scout hurried off his friend to view the various prizes which were to be awarded to the victors in the coming sports.

For the most part these were particularly appropriate, considering the probable contestants; a beautifully-finished rifle, a brace of revolvers, a saber, a silver-mounted saddle and horse furniture, together with smaller prizes of money, ammunition, etc. While examining these, the two scouts were suddenly separated as two officers pressed rudely between them. The taller

one pointed out the saddle, saying in a clear tone:

"I mean to carry off that prize, and as a proof that I mean what I say, I am ready to wager one hundred dollars with any gentleman—"

"Money talks," quickly uttered Happy Jack, shaking off the hand of his friend and facing the officer. "I accept your wager, Captain Stone—"

"And who may you be?" insolently demanded the officer, eying the scout from head to foot. "I said any gentleman—"

"I claim to be one, sir, as I will cheerfully convince you at any time or place you may choose to name. Meanwhile, if you have any doubts, you can settle them by one word with Colonel Markham. Here is the money—cover it, or own that you were talking just for the sake of hearing your own voice."

"You have said more than enough," replied Captain Stone, in a voice that trembled despite his iron nerves. "Lieutenant Blake, will you do us the honor to hold stakes? Thanks. I trust you are satisfied?" he added, abruptly turning to Happy Jack.

"Perfectly," bowed the scout.

"I hope you may be able to say as much by this time to-morrow," and with a little laugh the captain strode away toward the pavilion.

"You've stirred up an ugly devil, pard," earnestly said Comstock, as they turned away from the little crowd. "He's giv' his rattle; he'll not wait long afore strikin'."

"At any other time or place he wouldn't have had time to do either," was the quiet reply. "He did not crowd us like that for nothing. I can't imagine his reasons, but I feel that he came here simply to pick a quarrel."

"I reckon he couldn't come to a better place fer gettin' the full wuth o' his money," grinned Comstock.

"I'll do my best to satisfy him, at least. But now—about this bet; what is the saddle offered for?"

"The old trick—you remember the fun we had down Taos way? Pluckin' the cock—*el gallo*."

"Old 'Paint' will do, then," muttered the scout, glancing toward a curiously-spotted mustang that stood near. "I wouldn't like to trust Simoom in the scrimmage."

"You'll need a fast an' a good horse, sure. The cap'n is a born devil to ride, an' the tricks he don't know ain't wuth much. You'd better take my critter—"

"No—old 'Paint' knows me better, and is plenty fresh enough. See! there goes the gallant captain with a choice companion for one who will bet only with gentlemen!"

"Injun Dan! the blackest thief unhung! I'd give a hoss to know jest what they're sayin'. Ha! I knew it! they're goin' to saddle up. Good enough! I reckon I'll take a hand in the music."

"Then you think—"

"I think that ef Mister Injun Dan tries any o' his underhan' tricks, he'll run aginst a snag. I won't interfere unless he does. You never mind him, but just keep an eye on the cap'n."

There was no time to say more, for the signal was blown for the contestants to appear before the judge's stand, where the rules governing "El Gallo" were briefly stated. A rooster was buried in the earth, leaving only its head and neck, both plentifully besmeared with grease, above ground. The competitors, their position being decided by drawing lots, were to ride one hundred yards at full gallop, bend in the saddle and endeavor to pluck the cock from its resting-place with naked hand. When one succeeded, all the others were at liberty to pursue and seek to wrest the trophy from him. All maneuvers were fair in which no weapon was used. A post was planted one-half mile distant from the bird. This must be rounded, and then the starting-point regained. The victor would be he who carried home the live bird; or, if torn to pieces in the *melee*, the one who could produce the cock's head.

Then the lots were drawn, and the sports began. Comstock was sixth, Happy Jack seventh, while Captain Stone was last, or the thirteenth man. None but crack riders had entered, few caring to risk their necks unless pretty confident in their skill.

At the blast of a bugle the foremost rider dashed off, passing close beside the buried rooster, stooping low in the saddle and making a grasp at the bird's neck; but in vain. The cock twisted its long neck to one side, and the baffled horseman flushed hotly as his ears tingled with the ironical cheers of the spectators, as, according to the rules, he swept around to assume a position in the rear of the competitors.

Again and again this was enacted with scarce a variation, though more than one of the riders succeeded in touching the bird's head, despite its dodging. Then Bill Comstock spurred forth, riding his tough little mustang like one born to the pig-skin. Differing from his predecessors, the scout lay along his mustang's side from the first, and sunk lower as he advanced until his right hand swept the ground for several yards before the bird was reached. Then he made his grasp, aiming not for the head of the bird,

but rather at the point where its neck disappeared below the surface. The bird dodged, but the scout's eye was true, and a shower of sand arose as Comstock, with a wild yell, swung the fowl above his head.

But as many a man before him, the scout laughed out of time. The cock's head was small—it being a pet game-cock which one young but enthusiastic admirer of Miss Kate had contributed, poultry being anything but plenty at the fort—its neck thoroughly greased, and even as he gave vent to his triumph, Comstock felt the cock slip through his fingers and flutter a dozen yards away.

The moment the judge saw that Comstock's "pluck" had succeeded, he gave the signal for the trumpeter to sound the *melee*, and as though impelled by the same force the twelve riders sped forward. Happy Jack had the advantage of position, and was half-way to the spot when the game-cock went fluttering from Comstock's hand. Then it was that both horse and rider began to display a skill and activity that called forth cheers both loud and long.

Unluckily for its chances of escape, the bird had got its eyes full of sand besides being sadly bewildered by the rough usage it had received at the hands of Comstock. Scarcely had it recovered its feet when Happy Jack was beside it, and stooping low, firmly grasped its legs, then sped toward the distant post, with a clear, ringing shout that thrilled the nerves of every contestant much as the "picking" of a banjo touches the springs of a darkey's heels.

Happy Jack rode in strict Indian fashion, without saddle or bridle, a scrap of buffalo-hide being securely strapped upon the spotted mustang's back. To the stout horse-hair girth were attached several stout loops, while the long mane was knotted together in a style decidedly more useful than ornamental. The use of these devices was speedily made manifest.

With loud shouts, the contestants rushed after the scout who was steadily nearing the turning-post. To all present it seemed as though Happy Jack was urging his mustang to its highest speed, yet he was rapidly being overhauled; but then Bill Comstock grinned broadly. He read the solution of Old Paint's sudden loss of speed.

Just before him rode the half-breed, Indian Dan, mercilessly lashing his big horse with a small coil of rawhide. On this Comstock kept his eye, believing as he did that Captain Stone had come to some understanding with the fellow that involved foul play. And a moment later he had the reward of his vigilance. He saw the savage quickly separate the twisted coils and stoop low in the saddle as his big horse forged alongside the scout, and giving his mustang the spur, Comstock glided forward, just in time. Indian Dan cast his noosed rope at the forefoot of Old Paint, but at the same moment a strong hand grasped his foot and hurled him violently from the saddle, completely foiling his dastardly attempt.

All this had transpired quicker than words can describe, but the momentary delay was enough to bring up the crowd of pursuers, so excited that not one had observed Comstock's action, taking the half-breed's tumbles as one of the natural incidents of the sport.

Then it was that Happy Jack shone forth in all his glory as a consummate tactician and skilled horseman. He was surrounded upon all hands by eager horsemen, each grasping quickly at the fluttering cock, crowding and pressing around and bringing Old Paint almost to a standstill. Among all none seemed more eager than Bill Comstock, though one in the secret would have seen that he was actually aiding Happy Jack, and urging the *melee* on toward the now near turning-post. Then it was that Old Paint played his part in genuine mustang style, biting, kicking and plunging furiously as the horses crowded him, all the time edging slowly but steadily toward the post. And Happy Jack—a dozen eyes could not have followed his motions. Now erect, holding the cock high above the wildly-gesticulating hands, now lying low upon Old Paint's back; again, hanging by one foot in a loop, his body almost touching the trampled sands, first on one side, then the other, and more than once slipping entirely to the ground when pressed too close; but all the time working his way toward the boundary, and never once losing his grasp upon the now loudly-squalling cock.

Then, for the first time, he called upon Old Paint, and right nobly the mustang responded, plunging ahead with an impetus that would not be denied, bursting clear through the crowd and sweeping around the boundary post, Happy Jack holding the cock aloft that all might see, then making a bold sweep over the prairie, the spotted mustang developing a burst of speed that astonished all who had rated him according to his first display.

Though now leading the ruck, Happy Jack saw that his work was not yet done. Just abreast him rode one man, who thus far had been contented with hanging upon the edge of the *melee*, though closely watching every move in the rapidly-shifting game. Keenly Happy Jack looked at the big, clean-limbed black, and uttered a low whistle that sent Old Paint for-

ward as though hurled from a catapult. But the big black kept its distance, apparently without any extra effort. Indeed the taut reins told a plain story of more speed held in reserve. The scout saw, too, that unless there was a speedy change, the two horses would come fairly together long before the goal was reached. Already the distance was so short that he could plainly read the sneering smile that curled Captain Stone's lips, and in that moment he felt that he would rather suffer death than defeat at the hands of such a man. Yet he dare not slacken his speed, for that would be to plunge again into the thick of the crowd, and his exertions were beginning to tell upon Old Paint, who had covered over a hundred miles within the last forty hours.

He had little time for thought. The goal was now close at hand, and Captain Stone could afford to dally no longer. He loosened the rein, and the big black was beside Old Paint almost at a bound. And in the one instant that intervened, Happy Jack read the purpose of his rival. He saw the devlish glitter in the stern black eyes, he read the vicious smile as the strong hand pulled hard upon the cruel curb. The black horse reared high in the air—then plunged madly forward as the rein was suddenly relaxed, his hoofs striking fairly upon the spotted mustang's back, just where Happy Jack had been sitting an instant before, crushing him to the earth, and almost losing its own footing.

A cry of horror arose from the gathering, as they saw the mustang go down—but then a wild, prolonged, and enthusiastic cheer arose, as they saw the scout leap from the ground and alight upon the black horse, directly behind the soldier—saw him struggle for an instant with his rival, then guide the black horse swiftly on—on to the winning post. They saw that he still held the cock, that his arms held those of Captain Stone pressed close to his side, his own hands grasping the reins and bird, as he paused before the judge, who promptly nodded his head.

Then the scout sprung lightly to the ground, with an absurdly polite bow to the almost suffocated captain, whose lips fairly frothed with rage and mortification.

CHAPTER II.

WILD SPORTS OF THE PLAINS.

"Give me a knife—a pistol, somebody—quick!" snarled Captain Stone, fairly crazed by the loud cheers and peals of laughter that greeted the bold exploit of the scout. "Curse you! I'll tear your heart out!" and he sprung to the ground, striding toward the smiling scout, evidently bent on mischief.

"Here you've got it, cap'n," cried Bill Comstock, as he leaped between the two, confronting the infuriated officer with a cocked and leveled revolver. "Here's the bull-pup you was axin' fer—an' its bite means sudden death, too!"

"That's enough, pard!" cried Happy Jack, thrusting the scout aside with a strong hand. "You mean well, but I don't need any man to fight my battles."

"Down with that weapon, Comstock! down, I say, or your arm will be one hand the shorter!" rung out a stern, commanding voice, as Colonel Markham galloped to the spot, his saber flashing brightly. "And you, Captain Stone—a fine example you are setting the men! For shame, sir!"

"He insulted me—it was a foul trick!"

"And how much better was your own conduct—or rather, how much worse? Bah! do you think to daunt me with your black looks? I watched you closely—I saw your every movement, and had you succeeded in your attempt, a man would be lying out yonder with a broken back, instead of that poor horse. No reply, sir; consider yourself lucky that I do not order you under guard for attempted murder."

"It was but the fortune of war, colonel," interposed Happy Jack. "If I am content to pass it by, surely there need no more be said."

"If my conduct needs any defense, it will not be made through *your* lips," said Captain Stone, suddenly recovering his usual self-possession. "Lieutenant Blake, you will please cancel that debt. And now, sir," he continued, as the money staked was placed in the scout's hands, "one word with you in private—"

"Not another word!" firmly cried Colonel Markham. "Captain Stone, you will come with me."

For an instant the eager spectators believed that the captain was about to give an angry refusal, but they were disappointed. Saluting stiffly, Captain Stone followed his superior officer to the pavilion.

"I come mighty nigh playin' the fool, jist then, old man," said Comstock, "an' I'd 'a' let daylight clean through the critter, ef you hadn't ketched my arm."

"You meant well, Bill, I know that; but I'd rather fight my own battles, all the same. I don't want you to get into trouble on my account."

"I don't often cut into 'nother feller's pie, but—you'll just laugh at me, as you've done afore—I tell you, pard, he's *bad medicine!* I known it the very fust time I saw you talkin'

to him; I knew that'd be a diffikilt; I saw blood atween ye—the heart's blood o' one o' ye. I know you don't take no stock in sech things; but I've seen 'em proved, time an' ag'in, an' I never read the *medicine* wrong yet! Ef I—ef I was to ax it as a favor, wouldn't you w'ar this?" touching the gayly embroidered pouch upon his breast.

"And leave you defenseless against witches and spooks? No, pard; I know you are in sober earnest, and I thank you, but at the same time you must let me go my own way. Only—I will not take any step toward settlement with this gentleman, without first consulting you."

"Good enough! We'll let it go at that. An' now—I reckon you hain't fergot the good old greased style! Brace up, an' show these blue-coats how a true mountain man kin put on the ginewine style! Yender she is, a-lookin' straight this-a-way, to see which one o' us is the purtiest!"

Happy Jack glanced toward the pavilion, and a faint flush tinged his cheek as he saw Kate Markham, seated beside her parent, but with her bright eyes unmistakably dwelling upon himself. Acting upon an impulse, he plucked several long feathers from the cock's back and bound them together with a slender curl of hair which he severed from his head with a knife. Then, releasing the cock, he sprung lightly up the pavilion steps and advanced toward the little group of ladies, uncovering his head as he did so. More than one dainty cheek flushed, and more than one heart fluttered with unwonted rapidity as the tall, handsome scout paused before them with a low, deep bow that was grace itself, but then Happy Jack bent his knee before Kate Markham and placed the tuft of feathers gently upon her lap.

"Ay! accept it, Kate!" heartily cried Colonel Markham, unheeding the bitter curse that hissed through the grating teeth of the officer beside him. "Tis a compliment you may well be proud of—a trophy gallantly won against such odds!"

"And as a token that I do fully appreciate the compliment—though there are many ladies here far more worthy the honor—I beg you to accept this favor, Sir Knight—and may you bear it to victory in whatever you undertake," cried Kate, her roguishly-laughing eyes belying the mock solemnity of her face, as she took the scarlet ribbon from her hair and pinned it upon the scout's left breast.

"I will uphold it with my life, lady," quietly replied Happy Jack, but there was a steady glow in his large eyes that caused the fair cheek to burn and tingle long after the scout had bowed low and quitted the stand.

"Three cheers for the cock o' the walk!" yelled a shrill voice, as Happy Jack sprung lightly to the ground, and a queer-looking figure mounted upon as queer a horse, flung his greasy hat high into the air, and led the wild chorus with an ear-splitting screech that would have shamed the wildest wail of a bagpipe. "Hurray fer hur— Whoal ye or'nary brute—*whoa!*"

Evidently half-distracted with the uproar—for the band struck up at the same moment—the huge, rawboned brute upon which the stranger was mounted began to plunge, back and kick as though desirous of instituting a circus wholly upon its own hook.

"Hurray fer—dog-gone the pesky critter! whoa! Thar, now—I say! don't somebody want to buy a boss? Warranted sound as a dollar, an' gentler nor a lamb—no bad tricks—Wall, I ber-durned!" he spluttered, as the animal's heels went up and its master turned a somersault in the air alighting fair and square upon his feet, still holding the reins.

"How are you, *lamb!*" snickered a soldier.

"That's the way I al'ays git off whenever I'm in a hurry," grinned the stranger. "Now, jest take a squint at that 'ar gelorius animule! Ain't he a pictur' fit fer framin' an' hangin' on the wall fer ye to look at whenever ye feel lonely an' downhearted? I tell you, gentlemen, they ain't money enough in this 'ere gelorius kentry to buy one side o' that noble critter—no, sir!"

"You traveled in the night, coming here, didn't you, stranger?"

"Part way, yes," was the reply, slightly puzzled.

"I knew it! If you hadn't, the crows 'd a' picked you up afore you got half-way!"

"I knowed a young feller once that tried to make fun o' a old man an' his boss, an' afore night he tuck sick an' died," solemnly said the stranger. "Folks do say he was too durned smart, an' it jest sorter struck in an' he died. But, don't send fer the doctor jest yit, young feller—I don't reckon you'll go under *that* way!"

Tall and gaunt, the stranger bore his age with no other trace of decay than in his long hair and heavy beard of snow-white hue. His garments would have disgraced a scarecrow, so patched and ragged were they; though the brace of revolvers in his belt, the short, heavy rifle that he bore, were evidently of the finest pattern, and richly ornamented with silver and gold.

"I've seen him afore, *somewhar*," muttered Bill Comstock to his friend, and, low as his tones were, the stranger must have caught them, for he instantly uttered:

"I've bin ther more times than you kin count, pard. Take a good, squar' look an' see ef you cain't place me. No?" as the scout slowly shook his head with a puzzled air. "Sich is life! what's the use o' livin' when a feller's forgotten afore he's remembered? Not a durned bit! But that don't matter, jest now. When's the circus goin' to open up ag'in? I'm in a hurry to git back to the ole women an' children—if any o' you fellers is married you don't want to ax the reason why. Whoa! thar—*you Prickly P'ar—woho!* Somebody ketch holt an' hold his hind feet, thar!" squealed the stranger, as his horse began dancing nervously around at the sound of the bugle.

As those who were acquainted with the programme knew, this was the signal for the first contest at shooting—confined to the soldiers, with military rifles. The target was the ordinary circular one, placed two hundred yards distant, each man having three shots off-hand, for suitable prizes. The competition was of little interest save to those more immediately concerned, and to the stranger, who kept those around him in high spirits by his quaint remarks.

"That war party fa'r shootin'," he said, pressing into the crowd that surrounded the flushed winner of the first prize. "Perty fa'r shootin', considerin'—"

"Can you do better?" hotly exclaimed the soldier.

"I don't know how it'd be with one o' them things," eying the military rifle curiously. "But I wouldn't mind tryin' of it, ef so be the boss'd agree. Jest fer fun, ye know. I couldn't bet nothin', 'cause I b'long to the church—leastways, my old woman does."

"You shall have a trial, my friend," laughed Colonel Markham; "and if you succeed in beating Fletcher's score, I'll duplicate the prize he won."

"I don't ax nothin' I don't win fa'r," bluntly replied the old man, accepting the proffered rifle and striding to the score.

The eager spectators saw that he was no novice with the rifle, and when his three shots were fired, a dozen sped away to fetch the target. The old man smiled grimly as a low murmur of wonder ran through the crowd when the result was seen; the three bullets had completely cut out the center of the target, leaving a triangular hole as perfectly outlined as though drawn with a compass.

"I'd a' putt them all in one, ondly I knowed some o' you fellers'd sw'ar I missed the hull signboard," chuckled the stranger. "Anybody could do that!"

"You don't mean you could do better?"

"Mebbe not—only I do know this: I was hired once at a shot-tower fer to make bars o' lead. Powder was plenty, an' they was heaps o' pine logs layin' round loose, so I'd jest go off a mile or two an' bore them logs chuck-full o' lead bars—puttin' one bullet on top o' nother ontel they each one weighed jest half a pound. That way I got so I could shoot right peertur I hain't fergot how yit."

"You can handle the long bow pretty well, too," dryly remarked Colonel Markham, as he turned away.

Again the bugle sounded a change of programme, and the judge, arising, read aloud the conditions governing the contest for the next prize, which was to be awarded to the man displaying the greatest skill as marksman, with whatever weapon he might select. There was to be no particular target, no set rules governing the competition.

Prominent among the entries were the two scouts and the stranger, and, as the interest of all the spectators became centered in the doings of these three, the feats of the others may as well be passed over in silence.

Bill Comstock and Happy Jack—the latter mounted upon Simoom, a magnificent blood-bay stallion, worth a king's ransom—rode forth upon the level plain where their maneuvers might be unhampered, and separating, began sweeping around in a circle, keeping directly opposite each other, and divided by about fifty yards of space. As in the game of *el gallo*, Happy Jack rode in strict Indian fashion, while Comstock used saddle and bridle. The former bore a stout bow and quiver full of arrows; the latter his revolvers, while a small round Indian shield of buffalo-hide was upon his left arm.

At a swift, steady gallop the horses circled around, then Happy Jack suddenly disappeared behind his steed's body. The spectators heard a sharp *twang*, and an arrow flashed from beneath the blood-bay's belly, aimed with deadly force direct at Comstock's heart. One moment later the scout's pistol spoke sharply. As he circled around, facing the crowd, a loud cheer arose as they saw the feathered shaft quivering deep in the hair-stuffed shield. Again and again came the twang of the taut bowstring, answered promptly by the revolver, and even the two horses seemed to catch the spirit of the wild drama, flying swifter and swifter around the circle. The arrows were sped oftener and at shorter intervals, but the eagle-eyed, steel-nerved scout was equal to the emergency and each time the small shield was interposed, until it fairly bristled with arrows. Now hanging

by one arm through the knotted mane, now dangling by one foot, his head almost sweeping the sand, Happy Jack discharged his arrows with a skill that was little short of marvelous; not one of them but would have carried death to his adversary but for the dextrously-managed shield. Then the last arrow was sped, Comstock fired his twelfth bullet, and rising erect the two scouts galloped back to the judge's stand. Comstock handed him the shield, in which bristled twenty-four arrows; not one had been missed. Happy Jack passed up his broad-brimmed sombrero, in the crown of which could be counted twelve distinct holes. Until now the spectators had fancied Comstock had fired at random, since their movements had been so rapid that no one noticed when Happy Jack would thrust the hat above his horse's back.

"I reckon you fellers 'll hev to 'vide that rifle round atween ye," grinned the old man, heartily adding his congratulations to the rest. "I'm gittin' most too old to play sech tricks as them, an' ef I was to try, like enough Prickly P'ar, thar, 'd set up a circus on his own hook an' spile the hull thing."

"A game is never lost until it is played out, stranger," replied Happy Jack. "Your eye is as keen and your hand as true as it ever was, and if you can repeat your score with that clumsy blunderbuss, you should be able to show us something even better with such a weapon as you carry."

"It's the one I used to make lead bars with," chuckled the stranger. "She kin speak thirty times without stoppin' fer breath, an' never tell a lie through the hull sermon. No, I won't back out, seein' I've shipped in, but you fellers mustn't laugh ef the old man don't pan out as well as ye 'specte," and he glided off toward the pavilion, where he quickly found what he required—a broad board some eight feet long, which he shouldered and marched out upon the prairie for a few score yards, when, by the aid of his knife, he soon planted the board firmly in the ground, standing on end.

Then he uttered a sharp whistle, and a wretched-looking Indian shambled heavily toward him. After a moment's conversation, the old man returned and took up his rifle. The Indian now stood beside the board, one hand placed flat against it, the fingers widely outspread.

"Somebody count out five, jest about like a clock would tick," cried the stranger, taking his stand.

The judge complied, each word being drowned by the sharp explosion of the old man's rifle—an "Evans," by the way.

"That's the fust act," cried the stranger, with a low laugh. "Somebody go see whar them bullets hit."

The judge himself, restraining the eager crowd, hastened to inspect the target. He found a bullet-hole at the end of the Indian's thumb and each finger, planted with such skill that one-sixteenth of an inch nearer would have cut the flesh!

As soon as the target was clear, the Indian placed his back to the board, standing erect, and uttered a clear cry. At the signal the rifle was leveled and discharged so rapidly that the reports seemed blended in one long roll.

"I ain't much at writin' with a pen, but I'm the boy as kin jest beat snakes a-markin' out of a Injun's head," cried the marksman, with a shrill, reckless laugh.

Pale and excited, the judge returned from inspecting the target.

"I must protest against such a reckless risk of life, colonel," he exclaimed. "I found the marks of those twenty shots ranged around the Indian's head so closely that they must have fairly grazed his skin!"

"Ax the red skin ef thar was any danger, boss," grinned the stranger. "Ax him, an' he'll tell you he'd stan' up all day at twice the distance fer a quart o' whisky."

"That may be, but if there is any more such exploits to come, there must be another judge. As it is—though you refuse to give your name, I must award you the prize. There is nothing that can approach your display—either in steadiness of nerve or skill."

"You want my name—the hull on it 'd be a mouthful big enough to choke a mule, but I'll jest show ye the 'initials; the rest kin wait fer the next prize I win," and with another peculiar laugh the stranger discharged both revolvers in rapid succession at the board; and when it was brought in, the board bore two letters formed by twelve bullet-holes; the letters "L.T."

CHAPTER III.

NEW ACTORS ON THE STAGE.

As it was now considerably past the meridian, and all was in readiness, Colonel Markham gave the signal, and gallantly offering his arm to Mrs. Major Mackintosh, led the way to the refreshment tables, which were placed at the northern wall of the fort, covered from the sun's rays by an ample canvas ceiling. Despite the general relaxation of discipline—for that occasion only—there were different tables for the different ranks; the officers and their ladies dining by themselves, far enough removed from

the larger tables not to be much disturbed by the rather boisterous merriment of the "boys in blue" and their companions. The "spread" was one that did the colonel honor; he had spared neither pains nor expense, and, if possible, he stood higher than ever in the estimation of his men when that board was cleared—as it was, with astonishing celerity. True, there were a few grumbling remarks at the officers having an unlimited supply of liquor, while they, the privates, were allowed but one dram; but the majority fully recognized the wisdom of such a course.

"I'd give one month's pay jest to know when an' whar I've seen that feller afore," remarked Bill Comstock to his friend, as they left the table and strolled back to the ground, filling their pipes for a smoke. "Ef it wasn't him, then it was some close kin to him. But to save me, I Cain't place him."

"Speak of the devil—" laughed Happy Jack, as the tall, awkward figure of the stranger came in view. "He's coming to give you another chance, old boy."

"Gentlemen," quoth the old man, dropping down beside them and thrusting a stumpy clay pipe in one corner of his mouth, then chipping tobacco from a huge plug, "they's one thing I want to ax: is this 'ere the kind o' work Uncle Sam pays you sojer fellers to do? A-shootin' an' a-kickin' around in play, which ye gets paid for, an' grub throwed in—sech grub! I've ett an' ett ontel, actilly, my clo'es is two sizes too small fer me! Ef this is the reg'lar line o' duty, then I'm gwine to jine the calverly right away!"

"Scarcely," laughed Happy Jack. "This is a holiday, thanks to Colonel Markham and his fair daughter. I'm afraid you would soon grow disgusted with serving in the ranks—though, unless I am mistaken, you would shine as a scout."

"Which is her?" asked the stranger, after he had borrowed a light of Comstock. "You see I'm a stranger in these parts, an' when I come down, my old woman she made me promise to find out everything, so I could tell her all about the doin's when I got back ag'in."

Happy Jack pointed out Miss Markham as the gay party abandoned the table for the pavilion.

"A right peert lookin' gal!" muttered the stranger, following Kate's graceful motions with a strangely intent gaze. "I reckon they lied when they said she was gwine to ride in the race this arternoon?"

"Eyes open, pard!" hastily muttered Comstock. "Thar's snakes around!" and he slightly nodded his head toward the figure of Captain Stone, who was slowly approaching them.

Happy Jack arose to his feet as the officer paused before him. Though unusually pale, the captain had lost all trace of his mad rage and mortification, and when he spoke his voice was calm and even.

"Will you favor me with half a dozen words in private, Mr.—"

"You can call me Happy Jack, captain. As for the rest, I am entirely at your service. Gentlemen, will you oblige us?"

With one warning glance, Comstock turned away, together with the stranger, but though he passed beyond ear-shot, he kept close enough to witness all that transpired.

"I know what you anticipate," said Stone, quietly; "but that is not my object just at present. I was obliged to pass my word to Colonel Markham, or else be placed under guard. I did pledge it, *for this one day*. I see you understand me. Now listen. There is no need of beating 'round the bush. I took an intense dislike to you at the first sight of your face, and I know that you do not exactly love me. Just why we need not inquire. You defeated me once. I ask another chance. You have a noble horse, and I have another. I challenge you to ride against me this afternoon. If I lose, you may name the forfeit; if I win, I will claim the same right. Do you agree?"

"To ride the race? yes; but I prefer that the stakes be named beforehand," quietly responded Happy Jack. "As you know, I am a simple scout, and my pay—"

"What I ask will not break you," interrupted Stone, with a harsh, forced laugh. "It is a mere fancy of mine—that knot of ribbons upon your breast."

"I thought as much! No, Captain Stone, you haven't wealth enough to stake against *this*, even though you flung your own life in the balance against it."

"A noble guardian for a lady's favor!" sneered the officer. "The ribbon should have been snow-white, to match the heart it covers!"

"You have said more than enough, Captain Stone," sternly uttered the scout. "Hands are tied here, but repeat those words to-morrow, and I will cram them down your lying throat!"

"You shall have the chance—then it is agreed?" he added, in a changed tone, as he caught sight of Colonel Markham hastening toward the spot. "Colonel, you will be witness? This gentleman and I have agreed to run our horses, the winner to take both."

Colonel Markham glanced inquiringly at Happy Jack, who promptly accepted the situation, and replied:

"Yes; we have agreed to run one mile—around the stake yonder—and return; his black against Simoom."

"I am glad it is no more," was the hearty reply. "I was afraid your hot heads were carrying you too far. I will act as judge—though I am sorry for you, captain. Nothing short of lightning on four feet can touch glorious old Simoom."

"And I would rather go afoot the rest of my life, than to ride a horse that owns a superior," laughed Stone.

"Shall it be decided at once, or after the other races?"

"Just as this gentleman prefers," replied the officer.

"If left to me, I say the sooner the better. You know, colonel, that I have been in the saddle for three days past, nor have I closed my eyes since night before last. Naturally enough I feel somewhat tired and sleepy."

"Very well; get your animals ready. I will postpone the other races for a few minutes."

Happy Jack quickly informed Comstock of all that had passed between himself and the captain, then saddled and bridled his blood-bay, riding over to the judge's stand, where Colonel Markham declared the conditions of the race. The contestants were to run to the post which served as boundary in the game of *el gallo*; they were to turn the post from right to left, then back home, the first comer to possess both horses.

At the word, both animals darted away swift as arrows fresh from the bow, stretching out long and low as their sinewy limbs devoured the space, eying each other in fiery rivalry; thundering on, with every nerve strained to its utmost tension; but then Simoom gradually fell back—back until his hot breath found the big black's flank, and Captain Stone turned his head for one swift, backward glance, a sneering smile curling his mustached lip.

Happy Jack uttered a low laugh; he also was content, for he knew that the game lay in his own hands. He knew that Simoom was the black horse's master, and was too fond of the noble stallion to run the slightest unnecessary risk. He had already seen how unscrupulous the officer was when his evil passions were aroused, and knew, too, how easy it would be for the outside rider to crush his adversary against the post in turning around it—an "accident" that could be plausibly explained, where both parties had so much at stake.

Steadily the black horse drew ahead until he was fairly clear, and the turning-post was close at hand. Happy Jack pulled Simoom to the right, making a far wider sweep than Captain Stone was attempting, and turning smooth and evenly, while the big black lost its stride and nearly fell as the iron hand of its master wheeled him short around the post.

Then the scout slackened his rein and spoke to Simoom. Right gallantly the bay responded, running low and level, but with the wonderful stride of a grayhound at full speed. A bitter curse broke from Captain Stone's lips, and he drove his spurs rowel deep into the black's ribs; but the fates were against him. Foot by foot, yard by yard, the blood-bay forged ahead, and Happy Jack landed him a winner, "hands down," by fifty yards, amid the enthusiastic cheers of the crowd.

Livid with suppressed rage, Captain Stone dismounted, and led the panting black up to the victor.

"You have won the race, here is the horse; take him, he is yours," said Captain Stone, in a low, strained voice.

"He is a noble animal, and deserves better fare than he would receive at my hands, a poor scout. Oblige me by keeping him, captain," courteously said the scout.

"Do I understand you to say that you refuse to accept the wager you have fairly won?" said Stone, his cheek flushing.

"If you will allow me. The honor of defeating such an animal is ample reward."

"Give me room—stand aside there," harshly cried Stone, as he wheeled the black and led him a few yards distant.

Then, before any one could divine his purpose, he thrust a revolver against the poor brute's ear, and fired. The horse fell dead, with scarcely a struggle, and Captain Stone strode swiftly to the fort, and disappeared within its gates.

Perhaps it was the wisest move he could make, for many were the hot speeches made by the indignant spectators of the brutal deed, and few present but openly declared that the nobler brute of the two had suffered a fate far more befitting the other. Then the carcass was dragged away, and the regular races began. Neither of the two scouts entered, but the stranger did, and once more he astonished the natives. His gaunt, big-boned, crooked-limbed horse showed a turn of speed that astonished all, and its ungainly rider exhibited a specimen of jockeying that would have opened the eyes of many a professional rider. There were three heats, over the same course as that ridden by the two men; half a dozen men rode in each heat, and it was arranged that the winners of each heat were to run an extra course, to decide the first, second, and third prizes; but this was obvia-

ted, by the stranger taking the three straight heats with apparent ease.

The old man seemed fairly wild with joy, and many were the wonderful tales he told of what Ebenezer, his horse, could do; nor had he concluded when the ladies reappeared, ready mounted for the concluding sport of the day. Two powerful grayhounds were held in leash, while a couple of soldiers, each bearing a box trap, ran out upon the level plain, pausing some two hundred yards in advance. Each trap contained a full-grown "jack rabbit"—the prairie substitute for a fox.

Kate Markham was mounted upon a clean-limbed, fiery little chestnut, and bewitchingly charming she looked in the saddle—as Happy Jack caught himself acknowledging. Close beside him rode the forlorn-looking red-skin, who had acted as the old man's target. The stranger, himself, kept well in the crowd, his horse prancing and plunging like an overgrown colt.

Then the word was given—the traps were sprung; out leaped the "mules," and with the unleashed grayhounds in pursuit, darted away like two white-tailed comets. With a joyous, ringing "view halloo!" the excited riders spurred after, eager to be in at the death.

"But not all. The big horse, ridden by the stranger, seemed to have taken a sudden disinclination to run, and began a series of prancings, directly in front of Kate, who was forced to fairly rein in her horse. Happy Jack turned to aid her, when the savage, who had kept by his side, dealt him a furious blow upon the head that knocked him clean from the saddle, then hastened toward the maiden. At the same moment the stranger grasped her bridle-rein and urged her horse at right angles to the chase, heading direct for the hills, little more than a half-mile distant. Kate uttered a sharp cry of indignation surprise, but before she could do more, the Indian was beside her and his strong hand held her forcibly in the saddle.

The shriek was heard, and cries of wondering surprise came from the hunting-party. Turning his head, the stranger uttered a long, ringing yell, then rode swiftly on.

A prolonged echo came from the hills; then, from another wooded defile, dashed a horseman, followed by another, and another—yelling and hooting, flourishing rifles and lances, riding straight toward the almost defenseless fort.

CHAPTER IV.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

HARD and sure the vagabond red-skin had struck, his bony fist alighting upon the scout's neck, just below the ear, and Happy Jack was hurled headlong from the saddle, for the moment fully convinced that he had run afoul of a miniature earthquake. Then, satisfied that he had fully carried out his master's orders and insured the success of the bold abduction by placing *hors du combat* the only one of the entire party who could have overtaken the big horse, the Indian spurred forward to aid his master in what remained to be done.

The loud, ringing yell that carried a thrill of horror and consternation to the hearts of the pale-faces, also served as a signal to the ambushed savages, who broke cover, charging at break-neck speed directly for the big folding gates of Fort Western, evidently calculating on cutting off the hunting-party from regaining the walls, and thus rendering a double victory almost assured.

Straight on the two men thundered, holding pale and bewildered Kate Markham upon her snorting horse between them, nor drawing rein until the charging savages opened their ranks and gave them free passage. Then the old man wrenched up his animal, flinging the reins to the Indian with a few hasty words, spoken in the Brule Sioux dialect.

"Take the squaw to the hills, Ground Hog, and guard her with your life!"

Then, sounding again his wild war-whoop, the old man thundered after his fierce warriors, eager to act his part in the dread drama of life or death.

Far different now from the sluggish, idiotic seeming brute of a few hours previous, was the Ground Hog as, one hand still grasping the maiden's arm, he sat in the saddle and gazed upon the thrilling scene, drinking in each detail with glowing eyes, his nostrils dilating like those of a fiery war-horse as it hears the bugle sound the charge. Never perhaps was fidelity more severely tried than at that moment—the intense longing to dash forward and revel in the feast of blood that had already begun to flow, almost overmastered the obedience of the savage, and, though he did resist the impulse to dash into the *melee*, the Ground Hog was held spellbound by the weirdly thrilling interest that ever accompanies the collision of bitter foes, where mercy is forgotten, where death follows defeat surely as black night follows the glorious sun.

For one moment Kate Markham caught a glimpse of her father, then he was hidden from her view by the swiftly-changing crowd, but the thought of his danger served to recall her natural courage. She cast a quick glance at her savage guard. She saw that he had eyes, thoughts, only for the wild, shifting drama be-

yond, though his hand still mechanically clutched her arm, and instantly came a desperate resolve to risk all on one bold endeavor to escape. She saw the knife-hilt protruding from among the rags at his waist, and instantly snatched at it. Her grasp was true—the weapon easily slipped from its sheath, and as the Ground Hog turned to her with an angry exclamation she drew the keen blade swiftly across the back of his hand. With a yell of surprise and pain the savage released her arm, and without an instant's hesitation she urged her horse toward the fort.

Hard as Ground Hog had struck, Happy Jack was not one to easily go under, and almost before the abductors met the charging savages he was upon his feet, but little the worse for his tumble. At one glance he read the truth, and as quickly marked out his course. A single cry brought Simoom to his side, and vaulting into the saddle the scout, a revolver in either hand, swept along in front of the charging savages, pouring shot after shot into their crowded ranks, and emptying more than one saddle-blanket before the savages could reply. As a bullet hurtled by him Happy Jack sunk behind Simoom, urging the noble brute on, sweeping around the enemy's flank—and before him he saw Ground Hog and his fair captive, just as the maiden made her bold stroke for freedom. He glanced behind him as an arrow cut his shoulder, and saw that all chance of reaching the fort was cut off. Half a dozen mounted Sioux were thundering forward upon his track.

Happy Jack saw this, and so did Kate Markham. But close behind her came Ground Hog, transformed into a veritable demon by the stinging wound he had received, uttering fierce threats none the less impressive because spoken in an unknown tongue.

"Wheel to the right—ride hard, and trust to me, lady!" shouted Happy Jack, touching Simoom with the spur. "For your life do not hesitate!"

The words came clear and distinct to the ear of the maiden, and were so earnest that they commanded an unhesitating obedience. Wheeling sharply to the right, Kate plied both whip and spur with right good will, while, with a yell of delight, Ground Hog plunged forward to cut her off. Better for him had he paid more attention to the other pale-face, whose magnificent horse was rapidly lessening the distance between them, whose steel-blue eye was already flashing at him over the leveled tube of death.

On the quadruple chase sped, parallel to the long, unbroken ridge that fenced in the level plain upon the north, still on, leaving behind them the furious death-struggle where red and white foes were mingling their life-blood together, still on, with every nerve strained to its utmost, both beast and rider doing their best. And now the complexion of the race changes. Though gallantly responding to its mistress's call, the little chestnut mare has been too highly pampered to cope with the hardy mustang bestridden by Ground Hog. Slowly but surely the raging savage lessened the distance, creeping alongside, his strong left hand outstretched to clutch his victim. But still more rapidly good Simoom was bearing its master on, leaving the yelling Sioux far behind. On—on! another leap—another mighty bound as the crimsoned spur touches his flanks; and then, at a well-understood signal, the blood-bay stallion runs low and even, steady almost as the barkin canoe floats adown the placid current. And then the scout's good revolver speaks, its sharp voice ringing the death-knell of Ground Hog, whose spirit has already started for the Happy Hunting Grounds of his race when his body touches the earth.

"Keep straight ahead, lady," cried Happy Jack, as Kate Markham turned her head at the pistol-shot. "We are chased, but the red-skins shall never harm one hair of your head while I can stand between."

The scout regulated his speed by that of the chestnut, keeping a few rods behind, while dexterously reloading his weapons. He saw that the Sioux, six in number, had not been discouraged by the fall of Ground Hog, but were urging their ponies to renewed efforts. Bitterly he regretted not having his trusty rifle. With it, he knew it would be comparatively easy to end the matter; without—his brow grew dark and his lips compressed as a desperate resolve gradually formed itself into a deliberate purpose.

At a word Simoom extended himself and quickly forged alongside the chestnut, and Kate Markham looked the gratitude her lips refused to form into words.

"A sad ending to our day of pleasure, lady—"

"My father—is he—" faltered Kate, striving hard, but in vain, to keep back the hot tears of woe.

"He is in the hands of One before whose will all must bow, lady," earnestly responded the scout. "But let us hope for the best. And now—please tighten your rein a little. Your mare is growing tired, and a stumble might be an awkward affair, just now," he added, with an almost laughable change to the practical.

"Poor Susie! but you, sir—you can easily escape those wretches. Ride on, I implore you! why sacrifice two lives—"

"Stop!" sharply cried the scout, his cheek flushing. "You do not know me, lady, or you would not insult me with such words."

"I—I did not think—" faltered Kate.

"I am a brute for speaking so roughly, but your words hit hard, lady," interrupted the scout, in a softer tone. "Though I am but a scout, poor enough at that, still, lady, I trust I am a gentleman, and as such I will stand between you and danger while I have breath. There are bitter and relentless bloodhounds upon our trail, but I can and will foil them; I only ask that you trust me."

"I could not help that, if I would," more frankly replied Kate. "Whatever your command, I will obey, if possible. But—are not those men overtaking us?"

"They are too far off to work us any harm, as yet," said Happy Jack, with a backward glance. "If the sun was an hour lower, we could laugh at them. As it is—"

"Well?" asked Kate, as he hesitated.

"The question will be settled in one way or the other before the sun sets. I have a plan that I think will work—it must work!" he added, decisively. "Now listen. You must keep straight on, following near the foot of this range, until it grows dark. Then you must enter the hills. Try and leave as little trail as possible. Do not lose sight of the open ground, but keep well covered. Make the best of your way back toward the fort. Once within sight you can easily attract the attention of the garrison, then all will be well."

"But you?" hesitated the maiden.

"I hope to be with you, lady, but it is best to be prepared for whatever may arise. By following these directions, you will have a chance for escape. Glance over your shoulder. You can see how steadily those hounds are gaining upon us. There is only one way—I must check them. Remember, you have but one thing to do. Spare your mare all you can, but press straight on. If you escape—as God grant you may!—tell the colonel I did the best I knew how. Now, lady, farewell. If I do not rejoin you before sunset, remember my directions; and remember, too, that—you will not be offended? Never mind—I have no right to say it. Good-by—and God grant that we meet again!"

As he spoke these words, Happy Jack bent in the saddle and touched Simoom upon the fore-knee. As though the finger-tip had been a bullet fresh from the gun, Simoom rolled over upon the sand. The scout alighted upon his feet, and sternly motioned Kate to keep on, as she half checked her mare.

"Ride on—it is our only chance," he cried aloud; and the maiden obeyed, though her heart was strangely heavy as she left the young scout behind.

With a stern smile, Happy Jack heard the exultant yells of the oncoming Sioux, and then he touched the bridle and Simoom struggled to his feet. The scout sprung into the saddle, and once more resumed his flight. But the blood-bay now limped sorely, scarce touching its right fore foot to the ground, and the exultant savages overhauled him hand over hand. And the panting, but game chestnut bearing the maiden was distancing him nearly as rapidly. A bright smile chased away the stern look on the scout's face as he noted the frequent backward glances cast by Kate, for he felt that they were not drawn forth entirely by the pursuing savages.

Suddenly the pursuers divided into three equal portions, one keeping steadily on after the limping horse, the others gradually diverging upon either side, so as to keep the scout in a direct line with the fleeing maiden, the latter four plying their rawhide whips with redoubled energy.

A deadly smile flitted athwart the scout's face as he read the meaning of this maneuver. It was more than he had expected—more than he had dared to hope for.

"A little faster, my boy—so! If those hounds only knew you as well as I! the fools are courting their death!"

It seemed as though Happy Jack measured his speed by that of the Sioux behind him, for as they slightly slackened their pace, so Simoom limped more perceptibly, until the four savages upon the flanks were nearly abreast their anticipated prey, and with shrill yells began to close in upon him.

Then Happy Jack uttered a sharp cry—Simoom wheeled at his touch, and dashed straight at the outer two, all traces of lameness vanishing as if by magic. Astonished, bewildered, the savages hastily leveled their rifles and fired; but Happy Jack laughed derisively as he thundered on, untouched, a revolver in each hand, a glowing devil in his eyes!

CHAPTER V.

THE WHITE SIOUX.

THE single shriek uttered by Kate Markham, as she found herself so unceremoniously treated by the stranger, was the first intimation the larger portion of the hunting-party had of the

sudden and terrible change in the programme, and even then some of the more enthusiastic sped on in the wake of the flying hounds and rabbits, thinking, if at all, the alarm was caused by one of those bloodless accidents so common among the less skillful hunters. But then arose the wild, peculiar war-cry of the man who had so successfully deceived them all; and from that instant on, the four fleet animals had the race to themselves, and for a moment all was utter confusion.

They saw the yelling savages burst forth from their ambush, and meet the bold abductors, saw them charging with headlong speed toward a point equidistant with them and the fort, and knew that if the savages gained this position first, a massacre would be almost inevitable.

Sharp and clear rung out the voice of Colonel Markham, calling his men to rally around the ladies, and right nobly was he obeyed. For the most part the riders were officers, and long experience in plain life had taught them a lesson of which they now reaped the fruit. A few—among them the colonel—had retained their sabers, while all were armed with trusty revolvers. With these in hand, the ladies placed in the center, the little cavalcade of bold hearts headed for the fort gates at top speed.

A hundred yards before them rode Bill Comstock, whose rifle had already brought forth the thrilling death-shriek, and whose revolvers now began to speak, as the painted demons thundered on. His shrill, reckless laugh rung out as he shot past the foremost red-skins, and found his way to the fort unbarred save by the confused soldiers, who, lacking a leader, seemed unable even to retreat to the friendly walls.

With a furious curse the scout rode into their midst.

"Out with your weapons an' come on! Would you let the red devils massacree them women without you liftin' one finger to bender? Come on! an' show the red imps what Uncle Sam's boys is made of!"

Back rode the scout toward the spot where the hunting-party was surrounded, but each man battling in stern desperation against the overwhelming odds, making every bullet count, closing in around the pale, speechless women as one saddle after another was emptied, and all the time forcing their way toward the fort despite the infuriated horde of bloodthirsty savages encircling them.

Foremost among the assailants was the man who had abducted Kate Markham, but far different from the uncouth, slovenly vagabond of the festival. The cunningly-contrived wig and beard was gone, together with the heavy, tattered coat and vest. From one of his braves he had snatched a long, heavy saber, and now repeatedly charged, his blazing eyes fixed upon the face of Colonel Markham; but as often was he forced back without effecting his purpose.

With a revolver in each hand, Bill Comstock plunged into the thick of the *melee*, and after a furious struggle, in which it seemed as though he must go down, he effected his purpose and joined the bleeding, lessening, but dauntless band. And a moment later, with wild cheers, the soldiers whom he had rallied, some mounted, others upon foot, opened fire upon the Sioux. With renewed energy the surrounded party forced their way forward as the savages wavered before this attack in the rear.

"On, men—strike home!" shouted Colonel Markham, as the savages were thrown into confusion. "Once more and they are ours!"

It seemed as though he was right, for at their rush, a shrill cry arose from the savage leader, and as one man the Sioux braves drew back from the death-grapple and turned their animals as though in flight. A hoarse cheer broke from the parched throats of the hunters, but this was quickly checked, as they saw the real object of the Indians.

At their head rode the white man, upon his ungainly horse, straight down upon the crowd of soldiers. Taken by surprise, and still lacking a leader in whom they could place reliance, the boys in blue met them with an irregular volley, but the next moment were scattered like chaff.

And back came a shrill, taunting laugh as the Sioux followed their daring leader straight for the still open gates of the fort.

A fierce curse broke from the colonel's lips as he spurred forward. No need for orders now. Even the dullest among them knew that the crisis had come—that if the enemy once gained foothold within the fort, all was lost. There was no longer thought of keeping up the hollow square wherein the ladies had, thus far, found safety. The peril was too great. And on the soldiers promptly rallying as their idolized leader shot past them, regaining their usual discipline as if by magic. But all seemed in vain. The hindmost of the savages were fully two hundred yards ahead; to overtake them in time to prevent an entrance seemed impossible.

But then a loud cry broke from the colonel's lips, and bidding all follow, he wheeled abruptly to the left. And not one moment too soon.

Half a dozen figures were seen just within the wide gateway. Then they sprung aside, the

movement unmasking a six-pounder cannon. The savages realized their danger, but were not given time to avoid it. The cannon spoke, and a double charge of grapeshot tore through their crowded ranks, strewing the plain with dead and dying, men and horses falling like autumn leaves, before the well-aimed piece.

"Charge!" shouted Colonel Markham, leading the way, and through the demoralized mob of savages they plunged, pausing not until the last man entered the friendly gateway.

"To you we owe our lives and the safety of this fort!" cried the colonel, turning to the gunner, who received his words with a cold smile.

"To these brave fellows, rather," replied Captain Stone—for he it was—motioning his hand toward the haggard soldiers who were wheeling the cannon aside. "But for them I could have done little. The scare seemed to have completely cured them—"

"To the loops!" cried Markham, as the yell without changed to a roar of insane rage. "I will know how to thank you more fully, captain, when we have driven off these red-skins—"

Reckless with fury, the Sioux charged the fort, and were bravely met with a galling fire from the loops. Among the defenders was Bill Comstock, and as the enemy thundered up to attack the gate, he singled out their leader and covered his heart with an aim that seldom failed. Nor was this time an exception, for as the rifle exploded, the chief flung up his arms and would have fallen headlong from the saddle had not two of his braves caught him in their arms. That lucky bullet ended the charge. A wild cry arose, and, bearing the fallen chief among them, the savages retreated in hot haste, not even stopping to remove their dead, finally disappearing within the defile from which they had sprung their ambush, a hearty cheer following them.

But all open exultation was speedily quelled, as the defenders looked sadly out upon the death-strewn plain, and then upon their sadly thinned ranks. Their loss had been too heavy for much congratulation.

The two cannon—all that Fort Western could boast—were carefully trained upon the defile, and then parties were sent out to bring in the dead and wounded. This mournful duty was not completed until the sun had sunk to rest, and the last squad had a narrow escape from a strong party of the Sioux, who had managed to reach the plain unseen. From this it seemed that the end was not yet.

A triple guard was placed along the walls, with strict orders to fire at any suspicious object.

A group of officers were gathered in one of the quarters, among them Captain Stone, who now shared the honors of the fight with the scout, Bill Comstock, who was also present. For the time the brutal conduct of the captain was quite forgotten, since it might be attributed his remaining within the fort instead of joining the hunting-party.

"An' to think I couldn't place him—ugh!" grunted Comstock, with a grimace of disgust. "I knowed I'd seen him afore, but whar, I couldn't tell, he was so changed and rigged up. But ef ever we meet ag'in, medicine won't save the varmint!"

"You are sure?" asked Lieutenant Blake.

"I knowed it the fust time I heard his whoop—it said WHITE SIOUX all over!" was the confident reply.

"That accounts for it, then," muttered the lieutenant. "Twice, while we were out yonder, he had me within arm's length, and my saber fast between a red-skin's ribs, and he could have cut me down without an effort, but no—he could see only the colonel; even at the time I wondered, but it's all clear now!"

"It may be to you, but remember I am a newcomer," put in Captain Stone. "Who and what is the White Sioux? True, I've heard of him, as a notorious renegade, but why should he bear such particular enmity to the colonel?"

"It is a long story, and goes back to the time when I was an ensign," thoughtfully replied Blake, lighting a fresh cigar. "There is no secret about it, that I know of, though I shouldn't like the old man to overhear me. There may be some among us that will remember the name of Leroy Temple—a captain in the —th, near twenty years ago?"

"I always thought he was dead," observed one officer.

"He may be now, but he certainly was not this morning. You may stare, but Leroy Temple, once captain in the regular service, is none other than the one we know as the White Sioux, renegade, savage, and traitor to his country. It is a black story, and there may have been blame on both sides; at least more than one of our youngsters thought so, at the time."

"We were then stationed at Fort Leavenworth, under Colonel Markham; he has not risen a step since, and some persons might say it was a judgment upon him—but never mind that."

"This Leroy Temple was a good soldier; his worst enemies could not deny that, though we youngsters thought him rather too strict, if any thing. He had cause enough, though, and a splendid example set him by the way in which

the colonel would 'set' on him at the slightest excuse. We didn't know the reason then, though we did before long. It was a woman, of course. She was courted by them both, and, unlike most women, chose the double bars instead of the eagle. Of course this made the colonel hot, and he kept both eyes open to catch Temple in a slip; but for a time Jack was as good as his master, so the old man had to take it out in growling and fault-finding. You see, he's changed a good deal since then."

"Well, the time came at last, as it always will, if one only has the patience to wait long enough. I don't just remember what it was; some little infraction of discipline that, in any other would never have been noticed; and Temple got an awful tongue-lashing, before us all, on parade. The poor devil was in no mood to stand it; as it came out afterward, he had been refused leave of absence, though his wife was very ill, and at the point of confinement. So he, instead of grinning and bearing it, retorted. The old man cursed him, and was knocked down for his pains."

"You can guess the next move. He was confined, then brought out to be tried before a court-martial. Then the old man showed his hand. He didn't want the man's blood, but he did want him disgraced. The matter was pretty much in his own hands, and the result was that Temple was cashiered and sentenced to receive fifty lashes. I know what you would say—it was a flagrant abuse of authority; nevertheless, it was just as I say: the poor devil was broken and flogged like a hound."

"That night he broke guard—killed one fellow, and escaped. He was hunted hard, but we never laid eyes on him again for years. As we found out, he made his way to St. Louis, where he found his wife had died in child-bed. She had been doing well enough, when she saw in the paper the sentence which had been executed upon her husband; and I verily believe that killed her."

"It hit the old man mighty hard, too; and he got a long leave of absence, which he spent abroad. That, very likely, saved his life, for such a man as this White Sioux has turned out to be, wouldn't have hesitated long before—"

At this moment the door swung open and Colonel Markham entered, so pale and unlike his usual self that more than one of those present believed he had heard the tragic tale of Leroy Temple; but if he had, that was not the object of his interruption, as they soon learned.

"Gentlemen," and as he spoke his voice trembled, "I come to ask your advice. I know not where else to turn, and if you fail me then my last hope is gone! You know that my daughter is gone—carried off by that—"

"Not fur, colonel," quickly interposed Bill. "My pard—Happy Jack—he took her away from them, and the last I saw they was makin' tall licks fer the west, a wheen o' red-skins after 'em."

"I saw that, too; but it is hardly possible that they could escape. Her horse was not equal to a long run. Unless we can aid her, all is lost!" groaned the bereaved father.

A sergeant paused at the door, saluting.

"Colonel, the enemy have surrounded us." An instant rush was made for the walls, and the report was found to be true. A dozen fires, small, but large enough for the purpose, dotted the prairie at wide intervals around the fort, and occasionally a momentary glimpse of some phantom-like figure flitting to and fro, as though on the alert to guard against any messenger for aid slipping through the cordon, could be caught. All was silent as death around, and it did not appear as though the Indians meant to do more than make sure that no one left the fort.

"That ends my last hope, then!" fairly groaned the commander, as the officers returned to the room they had so hastily left.

"You mean there cain't no help go out?" asked Comstock.

"I would gladly give one thousand dollars each to any who would—but it is useless—she is lost—my poor girl!"

"I wouldn't do it fer the money, colonel," quietly said Comstock. "I don't need much in my line o' life, but I'm goin' out yester to help my pard, ef so be he needs it, an' ef you let me pick my men, I'll agree to take them through an' never faze a ha'r."

"You will—when—when?" eagerly cried Markham.

"The sooner the better, I reckon. They'll be heaps to do, an' it'll be slow work. We'll start right off," said Comstock.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FORLORN HOPE.

"You think there will be volunteers? I could not order any man upon such an adventure," said the colonel.

"Nor I wouldn't take one as needed a order," bluntly replied Comstock. "I'd 'nough sight ruther go it alone."

"You'll not do that," quietly interposed Captain Stone, "for I'm going with you."

The scout did not seem to be very favorably affected by this declaration, and for a moment

eyed the officer in silence. Then he said, bluntly:

"A feller might go fur an' find many a wuss pard than you fer a tough bit o' work, captain; but this 'ere's goin' to be more'n that. I said I could take a wheen o' men clean through them red niggers, an' so I kin; but they've got to be men as are willin' to foller the least motion o' my han'—to do jest as I say, without stoppin' to ax questions. Now—I don't mean any 'fense—but you've had jest enough 'xperience fightin' redskins to think you know it all, an' it's big odds you'd git mad ef I didn't stop to tetch my hat afore tellin' you what to do. Lookin' at it from this p'int, cap'n, I reckon you'd better stay here. We'll all on us feel the easier for't."

"I pledge you my word of honor, as a gentleman and a soldier, Bill, to obey you in every particular," earnestly replied Stone. "If you still refuse, then I will make the attempt on my own hook."

"That'll double the risk. Ef you must go, we'll stick together," said Comstock, then leaving the room to complete his preparations for the perilous venture.

The scout had not spoken without cause when he said that he could find men who would promptly volunteer for the adventure, for not one of those to whom he applied made the slightest objection to joining him, though all knew that were they discovered in the attempt to steal through the enemy's lines little short of a miracle could preserve them from death.

Eleven men the scout selected, the larger portion of them being hunters or scouts to the post, the remainder veteran soldiers whose coolness and intrepidity had been thoroughly tested upon a thousand occasions. The instructions he gave them were brief and to the point. Each man was to bear a rifle, two revolvers and a knife, together with a canteen of water and a small quantity of dried meat. They were to obey his signals without a question, and trust entirely to him to carry them safely through.

Just as Comstock announced all things in readiness, Colonel Markham placed a rocket in his hand.

"If you succeed in passing safely through them, send this up. There will not be much danger, if your plan works, and it will tell me that there is still hope for my poor child."

Comstock snapped off the long stick and thrust the shell under his belt, at his back. Then the side gate was cautiously opened wide enough to permit their passage, and a moment later the little party—thirteen in all—stood outside the walls. Without a word Comstock uncoiled a lasso and saw that each man took hold of it; then he crouched low down and noiselessly headed for a point midway between the two fires that burned nearest the passage through the range.

The night was dark, and the sky almost starless, covered with a gray blanket of clouds as though a rain-storm was brewing. The wind was beginning to rise, and its moanings were noticed with pleasure by the adventurers as one guard against their cautious footfalls being heard by the watchful Sioux.

Their progress was slow, for Bill Comstock, though, in time of need, he was recklessly bold, was not one to risk defeat through want of patience. A dozen times he paused short, gently jerking the lasso as a signal for his followers to sink flat to the ground, and as often did the alarm prove groundless. And as they drew nearer the line of the fires, the scout increased his caution, pausing to listen intently at every step, and the prudence of this was speedily proven, when a low guttural voice came from the darkness directly before them. Like bodiless phantoms of the night the adventurers sunk to the ground as Comstock gave the signal; but the scout himself stood erect. An instinct that rarely failed him told him that the words of the Sioux were directed to him, and none other, though the savage evidently took him for one of the sentinels. And a moment later he was given still plainer proof, as the voice again demanded who he was. In an instant the scout's mind was made up; there was but one way in which the savage's curiosity could be satisfied.

"Hist!" he muttered, speaking the Sioux dialect like a native. "There are strange sounds in the air—the long-knives may be sending out runners for aid. Come! we will have a scalp to show our brothers—"

As he spoke the scout silently dropped his hat to the ground and glided forward, hissing his last words in the ear of the eager savage, who plainly suspected nothing of the truth. What reply he might have made can never be known, for a sinewy hand clutched his throat and a long knife was plunged to the very hilt in his broad breast. The stroke was sure and deadly. There was a brief, convulsive shudder—a momentary contraction of the brawny limbs, then Comstock held a corpse in his arms.

A low hiss informed his comrades of his complete success, as Comstock bore the body past them and placed it some rods in their rear, to guard against its being stumbled upon by the other patrols, too soon. Pausing only to tear off the scalp, Comstock returned and led his comrades successfully past the line of fires,

pausing only when they reached the mouth of the pass.

Few living men knew the country surrounding Fort Western more thoroughly than did Bill Comstock, and thus he was enabled to proceed with the work he had cut out for himself with little delay. He felt pretty confident that he could name, within a few rods, the very point where the main body of the Sioux were then encamped, but his rule was to make sure of one step before he attempted another.

Bidding his followers lie low, he entered the defile and quickly, though thoroughly, examined its mouth, assuring himself that no savages were placed upon guard there—as, indeed, why should there be such? The fort was surrounded by vigilant spies, and no one was likely to attempt leaving the post unless it was a scout dispatched for aid. Nor would such a one be likely to attempt the pass, since it led directly away from the nearest point from whence aid could be procured. And, in addition, the Sioux were encamped within the pass, a few hundred yards away, where the defile spread out into a pleasant, oblong valley.

Stationing his men under shelter of an overhanging rock, Comstock stole silently along until he reached the little valley, and the Sioux encampment lay beneath his eyes. There were several fires still burning, though faintly, and the majority of the savages seemed sleeping, though several groups were to be seen, evidently conversing over their pipes.

As he crept nearer, the scout gave a start of surprise. Before him, apparently as sound as ever, was the White Sioux whom he had so recently seen fall before his rifle! As if by instinct the scout leveled his weapon, and at that moment the notorious white chief of the Sioux trembled upon the threshold of death; but then the weapon was lowered, undischarged.

"No—it'd be sartin death to more'n him. Let him run the len'th o' his rope. Thar's the critters! Now ef I kin only—"

The camp-fires were built against the left—or west—wall of rocks, while, some yards beyond, and at the opposite side, the savages had secured their horses, where the grass afforded better picking. Toward these Comstock now crept, keeping in the deepest shadows and advancing slowly so as to avoid alarming the animals. His eyes glistened eagerly as he recognized among them the ungainly animal that had astonished them all that day by its wonderful speed and endurance. Though proverbially suspicious, the mustangs did not betray any alarm as the scout neared them, but lazily cropped the sweet grass, as though their appetite had already been satisfied.

Comstock cautiously skirted the herd, and found, as he had felt pretty well assured, that the savages had placed no guard over the animals, contenting themselves with hopping them, satisfied that the grass would keep them from straying beyond the limits.

The scout paused and seemed in doubt as he eyed the big horse belonging to the White Sioux. Under any other circumstances he would not have hesitated one instant, but would have sprung upon the back of the coveted animal and risked all on one bold dash. But now—to do that would be ruin to his comrades, though he himself might elude the savages. Only for the diabolical temper displayed by the creature during the prairie tournament, he would have attempted leading it softly away, but the risk was too great, and resigning the half-formed resolve with a sniff of disgust, Comstock stole away and rejoined his comrades.

"Hist!" he muttered, warningly. "Let me do what little talkin' thar must be did; you kin listen. The critters is in thar, jest as I sppected, an' they don't got no idee they's any sech fellers as we a-crawlin' round 'em. Now I'll tell you jest what we've got to do. It's no fool of a job, an' one crooked step'll send us sky-high quicker'n a wink. We can't do nothin' afoot, that's cl'ar. We couldn't bring hoses with us from the fort, an' so we've got to git them here. Thar's a-plenty, an' to spar', ef we kin ondly manidge things jest right. Ef the pesky critters would promise not to git skeered an' kick up the devil's delight, we could crawl up an' take our pick, fer all the look-out the reds is keepin'; but that'd be most too resky."

"I reckon thar's only one way to work it. You fellers'll foller me up as nigh as is safe, then lay low while I try to steal off the critters, one by one. It'll take time, but we'llhev plenty o' that afore day. Ef thar's a row kicked up afore I git enough, I'll try to stampede the critters, an' the rest o' you must try to ketch a mount as they pass by; those that do must light out, hot-foot, keeping cluse along the fut o' the range ontel we all git together ag'in. Them as don't—waal, I reckon they'd better salivate as many o' the pizin imps as they kin, fur 'tain't nowise likely thar'll ever be another chaintce fer 'em to do it."

While Comstock was talking, he cut his lasso into short lengths, to serve as rude halters for the present until they could provide better. Then, at a word from him, the men slowly, cautiously crept along the base of the rocky wall, and drew near to the grazing drove.

Now began the most difficult and dangerous portion of the scout's duty. Silently as a shadow he stole among the animals and selecting one of the best-looking, succeeded in passing the rope around its neck. Then, cutting its hopples, he slowly led it along through the darkness, passing it over to one of the men, directing him to steal cautiously out of the defile, but to await the coming of the others before attempting to mount. Returning, Comstock repeated this operation, only once encountering any serious obstacle. That time, a mustang broke from him, with a loud snort of terror that caused the scout's heart to leap into his mouth. But fortune still befriended him. The mustang backed against the big horse of the White Sioux, and was greeted with an angry squeal and a heavy kick, an alarm so natural that not one of the savages gave it any attention.

At length Comstock led away his twelfth horse, and sent the last man down the pass to join his friends, then returned to complete his work. This was not only to secure a mount for himself, but to arrange for a general stampede that should leave the savages without any means of pursuit until the light of day should enable them to collect the scattered animals. In order to effect this, Comstock had to pay each animal a visit, to cut its hopples, and at the same time soothe its alarm so that none would start away until he was ready. This was delicate work, but he proved himself equal to the task, and an hour later he severed the hopples of the big horse and leaped upon its back with a wild yell, emptying one revolver at the astounded redskins, then thundering down the pass, driving the herd before him.

CHAPTER VII.

A DUEL TO THE DEATH.

EVERY trace of lameness vanishing as though by magic, Simoom thundered down upon the astounded savages with a burst of speed that betrayed not the slightest symptom of fatigue. Never were mortal beings more thoroughly duped. Until this moment they had regarded their game as good as bagged—and now they were charged by the victim whose scalp they had already fingered in imagination.

Their rifles were discharged, but the sudden change of affairs seemed to unnerve them, and the bullets whistled wide of the mark. A shrill, taunting laugh rung in their ears—then the bold rider was upon them, his good revolver speaking venomously. There was a brief, confused trampling to and fro—a cloud of dust through which man and rider showed spectral-like; then a single horseman darted forth and dashed away toward the setting sun.

Until now the four other Sioux had been too deeply surprised to do much else than stare in open-mouthed astonishment, but now, as they saw that two men had fallen, that one alone had survived that brief conflict, their choking rage found vent in wild yells of deadly vengeance as they urged their jaded ponies on in pursuit of the laughing, reckless scout, who was now dexterously reloading the rifle he had snatched from the hands of one of the dead savages.

"The blind fools!" muttered Happy Jack, as he glanced over his shoulder and saw the Sioux fiercely lashing their ponies. "Will nothing but death teach them! Good enough! they ask for a lesson, and a lesson they shall have."

The blood-bay was covering the ground at a long, steady lope, just fast enough to hold his distance with the Sioux, but little, if any, more than two hundred yards. Kate Markham rode steadily on, nearly half a mile ahead of the scout, and keeping close along the foot of the bluffs. Happy Jack could see that her horse could not hold out much longer, and resolved to end the chase as soon as possible.

At a touch of the rein, Simoom wheeled as if upon a pivot, facing the oncoming Sioux. Happy Jack leveled his captured rifle, but like magic the savages sunk behind their animals' bodies, from under cover of which their rifles began to speak.

A grim smile lighted up the scout's face as he heard the poorly-aimed bullets whistle past, but then a stern fire filled his eyes as he covered the foremost mustang and pulled the trigger. At the report, the animal pitched forward, a bullet in its brain, hurling its unprepared rider with crushing violence far over its head. Then, shifting the empty rifle to his left hand, Happy Jack touched Simoom with the spur and charged down upon the red-skins with cocked revolver.

The wonderful speed of his horse once more stood him in good stead. During the brief interval between his wheeling and the discharge of his rifle, the distance between had been lessened nearly one-half, and the other hundred yards were almost covered by Simoom before the three red-skins divined the scout's purpose.

Their rifles were empty, but they each were armed with serviceable revolvers, and, with a courage that deserved better things, arose to meet the desperate attack. But, confident in the prowess of Simoom, Happy Jack felt that he had far too much at stake to risk all on one cast—in a hand-to-hand struggle with at least three stout warriors, and as the first pistol was discharged, he sank behind the blood-bay's body, veering sharply to the right and sweep-

ing swiftly around the enemy, gaining their rear without a check, nor drawing rein until he was several hundred yards in their rear.

Happy Jack quickly reloaded his rifle. He knew that, barring accidents, he held the key to the situation in his own hands. If the Sioux should decide to pursue him, he knew that he could choose his own course and distance, and thus insure Kate Markham's gaining a sufficient start to render her comparatively safe. On the other hand, if they were to chase her, he could follow, and, with the rifle he had captured, pick off the pursuers one by one as opportunity offered.

The Sioux seemed to be weighing the situation as well, for they drew together as if for consultation. After a few moments, during which much gesticulation was indulged in, one of them dismounted and stooped over the fallen brave. His inspection was brief. Then he remounted, and the trio urged their ponies on in the wake of the fair fugitive, now far ahead.

"All right!" muttered the scout, as he followed upon their track. "I hoped they would follow me, but as they wouldn't bite, I'll show 'em my teeth!"

Many a quick and far from easy glance did the three Sioux cast over their shoulders as they urged their tired but plucky mustangs on, spreading apart as Simoom crept closer and closer. Happy Jack smiled mockingly. He did not intend to run into the trap he had so recently showed them how to set.

"One more spurt, old boy—so steady, now—steady!"

As the rifle rose to his cheek a yell of warning broke from the red-skins, and they as quickly sunk low along their ponies' sides; but the precaution was in vain. The rifle cracked and was blended with a wailing death-shriek as one of the Indians pitched headlong to the ground, shot through the back.

This was the last feather. Desperately the two surviving Sioux braves wheeled their ponies and charged upon the scout as their only hope of life. Mounted as he was, continued flight could only end in their death, one after the other.

Nothing loth, Happy Jack touched Simoom with the spur and thundered forward to meet the enemy. They emptied their rifles, and the scout felt a sudden, sharp twinge in his shoulder, and knew that he was wounded, how badly, he had no time even to surmise. Like a living thunderbolt he dashed between the two savages, emptying one barrel at little more than arm's-length into the Sioux upon his right, and warding off a spear-thrust with his left arm, un wounded, though the steel head ripped his sleeve from wrist to shoulder.

Within double his own length, Simoom wheeled around and the scout's revolver rang out the death-knell of the last surviving Sioux before he could make a move at self-defense, almost ere he realized that his vicious spear-thrust had failed him.

Scarce pausing for a moment's breath after his rapid work, Happy Jack sprung to the ground and hastily inspected the fallen braves, making sure that his work was thoroughly done, and that none of their number lived to bear the tragic tale to their fellows.

"It looks almost like murder," he muttered, remounting and giving the blood-bay free rein as he followed upon the trail of Kate Markham. "Every chance was on my side—it was like shooting down hogs in a pen! And yet—it was for her sake. They would have murdered her—or worse! I can't feel sorry for it when I think of what would have been her fate had they succeeded."

A few moments later he once more caught sight of Kate Markham through the fast-deepening twilight, and urging Simoom on, he soon reached her side.

"There is no more need of haste, lady," he said, softly. "We have left the savages so far behind that there is little fear of their troubling us again, this night, at least."

"And you—you are not hurt?" faltered Kate, drawing a long breath.

"I did get a scratch—but it is only skin deep, and I scarcely feel it. But you—you must be nearly exhausted by your long ride!"

"I am—my side pains me severely; still I can bear it," bravely responded the maiden.

"If you can, for a few minutes longer. There is no necessity for us to ride any further in this direction. We must take to the hills. There are plenty of spots where it will be comparatively safe to camp—"

"Must we spend the night—is there no house near?"

"None nearer than the fort—and that is over forty miles as the crow flies," replied the scout, with a faint smile. "Even if you could stand the fatigue, lady, it would be impossible for us to reach there without a good rest. I can appreciate your feelings, so far from your friends, alone with a stranger—"

"That is not what I meant," hastily interposed Kate, her cheek flushing brightly. "After all you have done—"

"I did no more than my duty, lady," quietly replied the scout. "If you please, we will turn into this pass. It will serve our purpose as well

as another. There is a good spring not far away, and plenty of grass for our horses; though I fear they will fare better than we in that respect."

"I do not feel as though I ever cared for another mouthful of food," weakly said Kate, her head drooping.

"You will feel better after a good night's rest—"

"I can only think of poor father—those dreadful Indians! If he is only alive—"

"He is—I feel sure of that," replied the scout, with a confidence he was far from feeling. "You know we heard the cannon—that shows that our friends succeeded in getting back to the fort; and once in there, the whole Sioux tribe couldn't harm them."

"God grant that you may be right! Only I fear the worst," brokenly murmured Kate.

Happy Jack did not reply, knowing of how little avail were empty assurances under the circumstances, but he was glad indeed when they reached the little valley he had been heading for. He knew that rest and slumber were what the maiden needed most.

Kate sunk down upon the soft grass beside the spring, with a weary sigh. Happy Jack removed the trappings from the two horses and carefully rubbed them down before allowing them to drink their fill. After this he hopped the chestnut and allowed them to graze at will, confident that Simoom would never desert him. As he returned to the spring, Kate roused herself, with a visible effort.

"You said you were wounded, Mr.—"

"It is only a scratch," hastily replied the scout, touching his shoulder. "I will bind it up after a while."

"No; it was received in my service. I am glad that I can do this much to repay you. Come—remember that you still wear my colors," she added, with a wan smile, as Happy Jack hesitated.

Without a word he turned back the sleeve which had been slit by the Indian's lance, and laid bare the wound, showing red and ugly in the hard, fair shoulder. Kate gently washed the wound, then bound it up with her handkerchief, little dreaming what a subtle poison her soft fingers were pouring into the scout's veins.

"And now," she said, checking his muttered thanks, "may I go to sleep? I do not think I can keep my eyes open much longer."

Happy Jack hastily collected an armful of dried grass and leaves, and placed them beneath an overhanging rock that promised some shelter from the threatening storm, and, rude as the couch was, and despite her troubles, Kate had scarcely lain down before her eyes were sealed in slumber.

Not so with the scout. Though this was the third night since he had closed his eyes in slumber, he had too much to think of for repose. Of his recent perils, he scarce gave a thought—his mind was filled with one bright vision; he could only think of the fair young woman whose life he had that day preserved, over whose slumbers he was then watching.

The hours rolled by, and still he crouched there motionless as one dead. But then came a startling interruption.

Simoom raised his head and looked up the valley, sniffing the air suspiciously, and pawing the ground nervously. Then, as though his suspicions were confirmed, he bounded to the side of his master, thrusting his velvet muzzle against the scout's cheek. In an instant Happy Jack was on the alert, and knew that danger threatened. Cautiously cocking his revolver, he drew back into the deeper shade, peering keenly around. His lips compressed as he caught a glimpse of several dusky figures crawling down the valley.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE TRAIL.

WITHOUT pausing to note the result of his hasty fusilade upon the astonished red-skins, Bill Comstock urged his captured steed along the rocky defile, yelling like a madman, both to still further terrify the stampeded animals and to let his friends know that he was coming. On through the darkness, out of the narrow pass upon the broad level plain, untouched by the hasty volley of bullets and arrows which the Sioux sent after him, and then the reckless scout laughed long and shrill over the complete success of his bold ruse. He heard the startled cries of the Indian guards just before him, and sought to turn his horse's head; but the beast was too badly frightened, or too obstinate to obey the rude halter that encircled his neck, and thundered madly on as though he meant to charge Fort Western upon his own hook. But Bill had dealt with just such cattle before, and tightly gripping the long mane, he flung his whole weight to the right side, thus forcing the snorting brute to describe a wide arc, of which the bluff formed the connecting chord, only regaining an upright position when the conquered animal yielded to his will and galloped in pursuit of his comrades.

The confused trampling of hoofs had died away, and the scout chuckled grimly, for he knew that it would be long hours before the

White Sioux could again mount his braves to take the war-path. And during those hours of vantage, he hoped to find his partner, Happy Jack and Miss Markham, and with them reach a point of safety, even if they could not return to the fort.

While thus thinking, the big horse carried him through the night, over the rattling shingle at the base of the range, with the long, swinging stride of a moose at speed, and in a few moments more Comstock overtook his comrades.

"All here, I reckon?" he called aloud. "Good enough! Things couldn't 'a' worked better! Yar we be, good-mounted, ready fer business, chuck up, feeling a heap sight more comfortable than that big Injun boss back yender—"

"What's the next move, Comstock?" impatiently interrupted Captain Stone.

"To give the old man notice we've played the reds, so fur. It'll let the Injuns know whar to look fer our trail, but they know that a'ready, I reckon. You fellers ride right ahead, an' I'll fetch the durned thing off. Keep the bluff close to your right han'!"

Thrusting the end of the broken rocket stick into the muzzle of his rifle, Comstock struck a match and succeeded in igniting the fuse. But as the fiery sparks sputtered back through the darkness, the confiscated horse took alarm and went through a performance that severely tested the scout's skill to avoid being cast to the earth.

As a result the rocket dropped from the gun, and, like a wonderfully eccentric fiery serpent, darted swiftly over the plain until, striking some obstacle, it rose a few yards in the air before exploding. However, its object was accomplished for keen eyes were upon the lookout at Fort Western, and a moment later an answering rocket was sent high up in the sky.

Comstock finally succeeded in subjecting the ungainly brute which he bestrode, but the struggle was so severe and prolonged that he knew he must either abandon the brute or else contrive a more efficient bridle.

"You'd make a sweet lookin' duck o' me sposin' you tuck a notion to play circus when the reds was to the fore!" he muttered as, finally, the big brute condescended to follow the trail left by the rest of the party.

After overtaking his comrades, Comstock led the way at a steady lop through the night, nor checked his horse until full a dozen miles had been covered. Then, riding close up under the rock wall that here rose almost perpendicularly from the plain for two-score yards, he dismounted and left his horse in charge of one of the men. He was busied with some preparation in the dark for several minutes, then struck a match and kindled a "fire-ball," composed of rag, gunpowder and spittle, bound to the end of a short stick. With this in his hand, and carefully shielded from casting its glow far abroad by his hunting-shirt, doffed for the purpose, the scout glided out upon the plain at a right angle with the cliff.

His purpose was plain now. He was making sure that the two fugitives had passed this point before taking to the hills, as he felt assured they would do, sooner or later. He paused, when some two hundred yards out upon the plain, and moved slowly back and forth for a few minutes, then stamped out the fire-ball and returned to his friends.

"What word—good or bad?" eagerly cried Stone.

"Both. They passed by here, but they was six pizen critters cluss a'ter 'em. I reckon we'd best light out a piece furder."

Twice was this move repeated, and at the last Bill Comstock could not suppress a little yell of delight at the result of his search. He saw that there were only five sets of hoof-marks, three of them unshod mustangs.

"An' jist look!" he added, in high glee, as the rest of the company hastened to join him at his cry. "You see that 'ar track? That's old Simoom's handwrite—an' its kiverin' them made by t'others—the boy is a chasin' the Injuns 'stead o' them chasin' him—"

"And Miss Markham—the colonel's daughter?"

"Them's hern—she's still ahead. You see, my pard must 'a' rubbed out the rest—they was six at fust. He's got behind 'em, somehow, an' I'll jest bet my boots the gelorous old boy 'll save every identickle one o' them pizen skunks afore he lets up."

"More like he'll drop off, only too glad to save his own scalp—" began Stone, permitting angry jealousy to get the upper hand, when Comstock cut him short.

"Hold that, Cap'n Stone!" he cried, in a sharp, deadly tone. "You nur no other two-legged man shell say one word ag'in' Happy Jack afore me. If you mean to hint that he'd run away an' leave a woman in trouble, you lie like a dog!"

"For God's sake, gentlemen!" cried Sergeant Bowen, spurring between them, "have we not enough enemies without fighting among ourselves?"

"Right enough, old Trusty," replied Stone, with a short laugh. "I apologize to you, Com-

stock. I promise to say no more until I can speak to the gentleman himself."

"You'd better order a wooden overcoat aforehand, then," was the scout's blunt reply, as he glided rapidly along the trail, bidding the others keep close in his rear.

In a few minutes he came upon the body of the last Indian shot by Happy Jack, and quickly discovered the other two.

"That's the way your runaway feller does!" cried Bill, in high glee. "Ef you know ary man as kin do it up cleaner, then I'd like ye to show him to me once!"

Captain Stone made no reply, but more than one present felt that the officer would far rather the scout had failed, though he said nothing.

Tired and jaded by their long and hard ride after the day's excitements, and feeling assured that, once freed from his immediate foes, Happy Jack would take to the hills, the little party decided to await the coming of daylight, now close at hand. Riding in close to the rocks, they dismounted, tying their animals' heads close together in order to guard against a stampede, the men lay down and almost immediately fell asleep. There was no guard set, because, even if they had started in pursuit at all, the Sioux must be far in the rear.

Comstock was the first to awaken, and without disturbing the others, he strode out to where the red-skins lay, hoping to find something out of which he could manufacture a more effective bridle for his unruly horse. In default of anything better, he stripped a buck-skin shirt from one of the savages, and cutting it into strips, dexterously plaited them into a stout rope, then made a rude headstall, a stout loop to pass around the animal's nose, with lines passing through the throat-latch. In case of a struggle, a stout pull upon the reins would draw the noose tight, and, by checking its breath, choke the brute into subjection. The fierce resistance made by the horse as Comstock endeavored to apply this, aroused the sleepers, and it was only after several of the stoutest men came to his assistance that the bridle was secured.

Without waiting to make a regular meal, the party mounted and struck out along the trail, eating as they rode along. Comstock was in high glee over his stolen horse, which, after one determined struggle against the new power, yielded, and thereafter acted more like a civilized animal. He felt, too, that they would soon meet with his friend, and though he knew that the chances were heavy against the safe arrival of the entire party at the fort, his success thus far had given even more than usual confidence.

At length the trail turned toward an opening in the range, and Bill gave a little yell of delight.

"I knewed it!" he chuckled. "Good kiver, fust chop water an' plenty o' grass! I reckon they're in thar, now, a-waitin' fer us. Jes' lis'en!" and he uttered a shrill, quavering cry that came back in weird echoes from the beetling rocks.

But the expected answer to the signal came not—all was silent as the echoes died away.

"Mebbe they've pulled out while we was sleepin' back yester—or else they're so busy talkin' they didn't hear my call," said Bill, but it was a sickly smile that accompanied the words.

With a dark scowl, Captain Stone urged his horse into the defile. The last words of Comstock had raised an angry devil in his heart, a blood-light before his eyes.

But Comstock thundered past him, crying:

"A'er me is manners, cap'n! I'll tell Happy Jack you're comin'!"

His precaution was useless. He reached the little valley first, but it was empty of human life. He saw the footsteps beside the spring—the bed of leaves upon which Kate Markham had lain down to sleep—the hoofmarks and droppings of the two horses—but they and their owners were gone!

"They must have ridden on," said Stone, once more cold and collected, his usual self.

"Hold my hoss," muttered Bill, springing to the ground and crouching low. "I knewed it! look at them tracks! Thar's bin somebody here—"

At this moment Sergeant Bowen, who, with a precaution learned during a dozen years of Indian warfare, had returned to the mouth of the pass, came riding swiftly back, his face pale and stern set. Through force of habit he saluted the officer, though addressing Comstock.

"The Indians are in sight, following our trail."

"How many?" demanded the scout, springing to his feet.

"A large force—fifty, at least; they are not more than two miles away," came the truly startling answer.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WHITE CHIEF.

REPULSED but not defeated, the Sioux warriors fell back from the flame-lined walls of the fort, bearing with them the limp and apparently lifeless form of their chief. While he led them, while his powerful voice rung in their ears, the Indians fought with a stubborn valor more like

that of white men than their own race, among whom sharp dashes is the rule rather than a prolonged assault upon fortified walls. But when the bullet of the keen-eyed scout laid him low, the only thought of one and all seemed for him alone. Forming a living shield with their own bodies between the fort and the bearers, the Sioux followed their fallen leader from the field where so many of their stoutest braves lay dead or dying.

It was not until the little oval valley was regained that the White Sioux gave signs of returning consciousness. For a few moments he stared around him like one dazed, but then a dull, throbbing pain over his heart gave him the clew, and tearing open his fawn-skin shirt, he realized how nearly he had escaped death. What had once been a heavy medallion locket had received the scout's bullet, that, otherwise, would have pierced the heart of the white chief. The crushed and disfigured lump of gold, with the leaden ball still in its center, had been driven through the skin, and now clung to the bruised flesh.

A low, almost reverent murmur passed through the savage group, as all eyes saw how the life of their beloved chief had been saved by his "medicine," but the White Sioux did not notice them. With a hand that trembled like a leaf in the storm, he raised the shattered locket and pressed the broken spring. A few bits of ivory fell upon his lap. They still bore traces of having been painted—but no more.

The warriors silently withdrew as the head of the renegade white man drooped. Yet more than one eye caught the glitter of a hot tear—more than one ear the choking, half-stifled groan of intense bitterness as the White Sioux bowed his head over the last link that bound him to the short-lived past that had been so full of joy, so bright and happy—until he came to mar all—

The proud head rose quickly, a hot glow in his eyes that dried all moisture as by magic, and the White Sioux was once more himself.

His face and frame were those of a man just in the prime of life. The first, no longer disfigured by the mass of false hair, was clean shaven, with clear-cut, regular features, that, with a less stern and cold expression, would have been justly pronounced handsome. His frame was tall, rather active and sinewy than massive, with not a pound of superfluous flesh. A professional trainer of athletes could not have picked out one flaw in his bodily condition.

The chief arose and strode along the pass, pausing at its mouth. He cast one glance toward the fort, then turned his gaze westward, looking long and steadily. But he looked in vain. There was no living being in sight.

"Red Leaf will follow the trail to the home of the setting sun but what he will obey the words of my father," uttered a low, musical voice from close behind the White Sioux. "He will return with the fair young squaw, and the scalp of the yellow-haired hunter will drag at the heel of the Sioux brave."

"May you prove a true prophet, Kenekuk," replied the White Sioux, turning, his face softening in its hard lines. "Next to having captured yonder fort, nothing would more nearly satisfy me than the possession of that girl."

"She has a very fair face," was the slow, thoughtful reply. "She need not blush to stand beside Eunora, the star of the Sioux nation. And yet—"

"You have earned the right to speak, Kenekuk—my eye was upon you, and it made my heart glad to see the white-faces fall before the arm of my son."

Tall and slender, yet lithe and powerful as the panther was Kenekuk, son of the White Sioux. His garb was that of an Indian brave, severely plain and unadorned, his face guiltless of paint, for this was his first war-path. In features he strongly resembled his father, only with the higher cheekbones of his Indian mother. His bronzed cheeks flushed a tawny red, his large black eyes kindled vividly at the approving words.

"When the White Sioux leads, a coward would seem a brave," he replied, softly.

"If I thought there was one drop of cowardly blood in your veins, dear as you are to my heart, I would strike you down with my own hand. For this reason I watched you close this day, and I am satisfied. Now finish what you began saying."

"I said that the white squaw was very fair—but fair as she is, the lodge that holds her is not large enough for Eunora and Kenekuk," came the quick reply.

For a moment their eyes met fully; then, with a short laugh, the White Sioux returned to the valley. Once there he summoned his braves around him, and an earnest consultation followed. It was finally decided that the fort should be surrounded and close watch kept to guard against the passage of any courier that might be dispatched with tidings of the attack.

This was attempted, as the reader knows, but the cool cunning of Bill Comstock proved equal to the emergency, and when he stampeded the

cavallada, it came upon the White Sioux and his braves like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. For a time all was utter confusion, but then the stern voice of the chief was heard and obeyed.

He had been the first to reach the mouth of the pass, and with ear closely pressed to the ground, he heard the steady gallop of the party of adventurers as they sped along the base of the range of hills. Experience told him that those animals were ridden; their progress was too steady and uniform for the flight of riderless horses on a stampede.

Springing erect he called by name half a dozen of his swiftest braves—among them Kenekuk—and bade them follow the riders, leaving as broad a trail as they could. In silence the savages darted away through the gloom, while the remainder, under the White Sioux, scattered over the plain in pursuit of the stampeded animals.

Not until the rocket discharged by Comstock was answered by another from the fort did the White Sioux suspect that white men had stampeded his animals, rather than, as he had believed, a strolling band of Cheyennes or Crows. A few minutes later this was confirmed by the discovery of the sentinel slain by the scout in passing through the line drawn around the fort.

Unfortunately for the hopes of the bold scout, a few of the stampeded animals were so thoroughly broken that they speedily answered the calls of their respective masters, and by their aid others were secured. In less than two hours from the alarm, the White Sioux and forty of his braves were in the saddle. The chief paused only to give the remaining Indians their instructions. They were to keep a close watch over the fort, having their men so stationed as to cut off whoever attempted to leave the walls, unless in too great force for them to attack.

Riding hard, the Sioux pressed ahead, nor drew rein until they were hailed by one of their runners, who stood beside the bodies of the two Indians first shot by Happy Jack. The rest, under Kenekuk, had pressed on, though the hoof-strokes could no longer be heard, keeping the trail by the deeply-imprinted hoof-marks, aided by the sense of touch.

Day soon dawned, and then the Sioux pressed on more rapidly. The brow of the chief grew black when he came upon the last of the six braves whom he had sent in pursuit of Kate Markham and Happy Jack, and with a stern vow to avenge their deaths, he rode on once more.

The double trail was followed into the pass, Kenekuk going ahead on foot as scout. He was overtaken beside the little spring, and silently pointed out the different sign that had so disturbed Bill Comstock such a short time before. The White Sioux dismounted and examined the ground closely, while Kenekuk and two other braves followed the broad trail up the valley.

The chief's reflections were far from agreeable. Knowing less than the reader does of what had actually transpired there, he believed that the two fugitives had been overtaken by the party he had trailed so far, and that the girl on whose capture he was bent was now under the protection of over a dozen armed men.

Meanwhile Kenekuk and his comrades pressed along the trail keeping a wary look-out ahead, for the trail was very fresh. And before they had followed the winding valley one mile, the wisdom of this prudence was made manifest.

The son of the chief, who was in advance, abruptly paused, then sunk down behind a convenient boulder, in which action he was closely imitated by his comrades. There was no need for words, as the eyes of all three were fixed upon the same point of suspicion.

Just ahead of them the narrow valley made an abrupt bend toward the west, the outer curve formed by a mass of broken rocks, rising hundreds of feet in the air. At one point alone could these rocks be scaled with any degree of ease. There the rock wall sloped back in a series of rough steps, finally ending in a ledge of rock some fifty feet in length by half that in width, raised a score yards above the level of the valley. Along the edge of this platform was a line of heavy boulders, capped by smaller stones, resembling a rude stone wall, or fence. Above the rocks towered high, for a few yards overhanging the platform, then sloping back, full of rifts and crevices.

At the base of the rocky pile grew bushes and small trees, and it was a movement behind these that first aroused the suspicions of the young half-breed. Now, from his covert, he could catch a glimpse of a number of horses tethered there, and this convinced him that the wall above had been built by the hand of man.

At a word from him one of the braves left the boulder and began stealing away to warn the Sioux that their game was run to earth. But the tidings was to spread far faster than he alone could carry it. A puff of blue smoke shot out from one of the crevices in the rocky breast-work, and with one wild scream, the death-stricken scout lay quivering in agony.

Quick as thought the rifle of Kenekuk echoed

ed back the defiance, and then his war-whoop rung out loud and thrilling. In answer came the wild yell of the Sioux, as, following the white chief, they galloped swiftly up the valley.

A single glance showed the chief the facts of the situation. He saw the strength of the position occupied by the whites and knew that it could only be carried at a heavy loss. But, too, he believed that the daughter of Colonel Markham was before him, and that thought banished all others.

Again sounding his war-cry, he dashed straight at the hill, followed by his braves, who flinched not, though the rifles of the white men were already playing with deadly effect upon their ranks, and more than one horse galloped away, riderless, before the line of bushes was reached.

CHAPTER X.

BEN WATSON.

SILENT and motionless as death Happy Jack crouched at the feet of the sleeping maiden, his painfully intense gaze fixed upon the dimly-outlined, phantom-like figures, as they crept cautiously, noiselessly over the short sward. They were three in number, as he could now distinguish, but whether white men or red, he could only conjecture. He drew a breath of relief as he looked in vain for others. In her defense he felt he could hold his own against those three, if worst came to worst.

The crawling figures paused, then drew close together, as though for the purpose of consultation. The scout leveled his pistol and covered the party. The temptation was strong to fire, but—might these men be friends, after all? For her sake, he must act with all prudence.

At this instant the chestnut mare, which had been lying down, resting after its hard race, scrambled to its feet and ran to the side of Simumm with a whimper of alarm.

Happy Jack heard a sharp exclamation, and then, like magic, the three figures vanished amid the gloom.

"That's white, all over," muttered the scout, with a little laugh beneath his breath. "An Indian can curse, but he couldn't spit out a mouthful like that!"

Then, raising his voice, he called aloud:

"Red or white—speak up, or I'll send a chunk of lead through one of you!"

"White, clean through, stranger," came the reply, promptly enough and heartily spoken from out the gloom beyond. "We knowed you was somewhar nigh to han', but couldn't tell exactly whar; nur we didn't think it'd be healthy to ax too loud, sence more ears mought hear it than yourn."

"What is it?" trembly whispered Kate, whom the sternly-uttered challenge had roused from her slumbers.

"Friends, I hope," replied Happy Jack, in the same guarded tones; "but friends or foe, you are safe while I live."

"You ain't gone to sleep, I reckon," added the voice, impatiently. "I tell you, stranger, these ain't healthy diggin's fer men o' our color. We're ready an' willin' to help you an' the lady, ef so be you wish; but we've only got one skulp apiece, an' d be fools to lose them when a little dodgin' d save 'em. How is it, stranger?"

"Come forward, one of you. When I see what you are like, then I'll answer you plainer."

"Good enough!" and the speaker boldly advanced, guided by the sound of the scout's voice. "Yar I be, Ben Watson, as mebbe you've hearn on. I aren't so purty to look at, but folks gen'ally low I'm hafe white and free born."

"You say you've been looking for us. For what reason? How did you know we were here?"

"Saw you come in. I kin tell you the hull thing in jest two twos. Me an' my pards—that's a dozen o' us, all told—was on our way to the post, lottin' on takin' a han' in the big doin's we'd hearn was to come off thar, but fust we knowed we run chuck up into a pizen nest o' reds—'Rapahoes, they was. We beat 'em off in the eend, but two o' the boys went under, an' the old man—our boss—got more lead in him than he could carry comf'ably, an' we wouldn't leave him ahind. A little afore sundown we saw some reds actin' mighty funny over yender on the high rocks like they was watchin' somethin' heap good; so me'nd a couple more boys sneaks out to see what was in the wind. We was jest in time to see you knock over them redskins out thar, an' watched you come in here. We 'lowed to meet an' give you word they was snakes around, when the pesky reds ketched sight o' us an' we had to putt hot foot fer the other boys. We got thar ahead, an' talked the thing over. We knowed it'd be no easy job, but all agreed it'd be low down ef we didn't try to putt you on guard, an' that's why we're here, an' why we kem up so quiet like."

"Then you think there are Indians lurking near? But why have they waited so late? If they were strong enough to chase three stout men, why should they be so slow about attacking one man?"

"I reckon they thought a feller that wiped out three red-skins as quick as you did out in the open, would be easier handled asleep than awake. 'They ain't fur away, you kin bet high, an' every minnit we stop palaverin' ll be jest so much the harder fer us to sneak out o' this. Ef you say so, me 'n' my pards ll help you through, or try our best; but ef you don't like that, why we'll jest wish you well through the scrape an' look a'ter our own ha'r while they's a chainece left. Which is it?—an' talk almighty short too!"

"You have heard his words, Miss Markham," said Happy Jack, turning toward the maiden. "If the Indians are indeed skulking near, we are in danger here. It is for you to choose. Shall we go or stay?"

"Surely he would not seek to deceive us—his voice is that of an honest man. But you should decide; you must know so much better than I—"

"You say you were making for Fort Western; where from?"

"From Fort Union last—afore that the trappin' grounds. Stranger, you ask too durned many questions! One d think we was axin' a thunderin' favor o' ye, 'stead o' reskin' our skulps to help you out of a scrape. I ain't agwine to wait no longer. Ef you're comin', say so," impatiently added the trapper.

"We will go. But the lady is too fatigued for walking. We must take the horses."

"Then they've got to be soft shod," said Watson, in a tone of disgust. "Ef I'd dreamed of o' so much bother, durned ef I'd took a step, woman or no woman. Bet a bale o' beaver every pesky one o' us I'll get sent to glory afore we git a hundred yards from here!"

"Lend a hand, and we'll be all the quicker. Cut up these saddle-blankets. Call your friends and tell them what to do," tersely uttered Happy Jack.

The two men came forward, and in a few moments more both horses had their hoofs carefully muffled in the pieces of saddle-blankets. The side-saddle was placed upon Simumm, and then Happy Jack lifted Kate into the saddle, with a whispered word of courage.

When all was in readiness, Ben Watson led the way with one of his friends, the third leading the chestnut mare by the bridle, just behind Simumm. Happy Jack walked beside Kate, a revolver in one hand, his every sense upon the alert, ready for the worst if come it must. Their progress was slow, and the pauses frequent. Ben Watson seemed the personification of caution and prudence, and the little party passed along the winding valley as silently as though composed of veritable phantoms of the night.

For those who had marked down their prey, the outlying savages seemed strangely lacking in vigilance, and as the distance traversed without any serious alarm increased, Happy Jack grew puzzled. All this was so foreign to savage nature. It seemed impossible that braves upon the war-path could be so lacking in vigilance. Yet—that must be the solution. The story that Watson told did not sound like a lie, and was borne out by his actions. If he had been plotting evil, there would have been some incoherence, he would have urged their departure instead of threatening to leave them.

"I reckon we've give 'em the go-by," chuckled Watson, falling back to the scout's side. "We're good two miles from the spring, an' I don't reckon they'd be keepin' a look-out so far away. And yet—dog my cats ef I kin make it out to suit my own mind! I counted sure on havin' to burn powder afore we got cl'ar; it looks powerful like them critters must'a had some pizen long with them, or they'd kep' a better look-out."

"I was thinking much the same," said Happy Jack, with a feeling of relief. "It is not Indian fashion to let their game slip through their hands so easily."

"They's one other way to a'count for it," said Watson, thoughtfully. "They must 'a' see'd your critters was about tuckered out, an' the lady, too, fer that matter. They watched you settle down by the spring, an' on saddle. They knowed you, anyhow, 'd be purty apt to keep your eyes open, to make sure she didn't get into no more trouble, an' I reckon they lotted on waitin' ontel nigh day, when mebbe they could ketch you asleep. I Cain't think o' no other reason—unless— They may be out hopin' to ketch our boys off guard, jist leavin' one or two to see you didn't make off. Ef that's it, why, we may smell trouble yit."

"What kind of a place is it? Can we hope to steal in, with any chance of success?"

"Not if the reds is sneakin' around. Ef we was all men critters, we mought run right through 'em, but 'twouldn't do to run the resk with her. Thar's one way. I, or one o' the boys, mought go ahead an' see ef the road's cl'ar. Ef it is, all right; if not, then I could manidge to let the fellers know we was nigh to hand, an' they'd make a dash to kiver us."

"If you will do it—rest assured, friend, any service you or your comrades may do this lady, will be well recompensed, by her father, Colonel Markham—"

"Jest drop that, ef you please! Do you take

us mountain men fer niggers that had hogs fer masters? Ef we cain't help a woman out of a scrape without countin' on bein' paid in money—"

"I ask your pardon, friend," warmly uttered the scout, grasping Watson's hand.

"That's enough an' to spar', stranger. I know you didn't mean it, but no white man likes to be mistook fer a two-legged hog. The miss is more'n welcome to anythin' me an' my pards kin do fer her. Thar—that's enough. I reckon now I'll best crawl on ahead. You kin foller—not too fast. The boys kin show you the way, an' ll stop by the big rock, onless I meet 'em afore. You understand, boys?"

An inarticulate grunt was the only reply. Evidently Watson possessed the most nimble tongue of the trio.

There was no further conversation until, half an hour later, when they met Watson at the base of a huge butte-like rock. He seemed in high glee, and assured them that there was nothing further to fear, that no Indians were near enough to trouble them, and the party passed around the rock, going a few hundred yards up the valley, pausing at the foot of a rocky incline, from the top of which came the subdued glow of a camp-fire. Watson ascended first, while Happy Jack assisted Kate to climb the steep.

The scout cast a keen glance around him as he stepped upon the little plateau. A number of rough-clad men were gathered around a smoldering camp-fire. Just in the edge of the shadow lay two still forms, their faces covered with a blanket. To the right lay a giant in size, his head bound up, one arm in a rude sling. The latter arose and limped forward, one hand extended, as he uttered some words of welcome. Happy Jack accepted the hand—and then, without a moment's warning, he felt himself jerked forcibly forward—a terrible blow fell upon his head, and he lay like one dead!

CHAPTER XI.

"BABY TOM."

As she witnessed the treacherous treatment of the unsuspecting scout, Kate Markham uttered a sharp cry of indignation, for the moment forgetting that she, too, must be in peril, and as she saw the heavy pistol-butt that had stricken Happy Jack senseless, raised as though to repeat the blow, she sprung forward as though to protect him with her own person. But a strong hand settled upon her shoulder and she heard Watson's voice bidding her take care.

"You cain't help him, an' you'll only make trouble fer yourself a-tryin'. The boys ain't a-goin' to hurt him much, I don't reckon."

"And you, whom he trusted—a traitor! God help us both!" and Kate, fearing she scarce knew what, gave way and hid her face in her lap, sobbed bitterly.

Truly, she had good cause for despondency. In one brief minute, the entire aspect of things had changed. At first glance, the scene had been that of a night encampment of friends, whose wakefulness so long past midnight was accounted for by the story of the recent ambush and fight with the red-skins, proof of the genuineness of which might be seen in the two motionless bodies covered with the blanket, and the bandages of the gigantic man who had advanced to greet the new-comers. But then, as his hand grasped that of the unsuspicious scout, the giant pulled him almost off his feet, and before he could recover, one of the two men who had accompanied Watson, knocked him senseless from behind with a revolver-butt. At the same moment the two dead men flung aside their blanket, arose and came forward to aid their fellows if necessary. Their further assistance was not required, however, for the foul blow had been dealt by a sure and heavy hand, and long before his consciousness returned, Happy Jack was disarmed, his hands and feet securely bound with rawhide thongs and himself placed in a sitting position, his back supported against a pile of saddles. This accomplished, the giant, no longer making use of the sling for his uninjured arm, and tearing the dirty bandage from his head with a coarse laugh of triumph, passed over to where Ben Watson still stood guard over the sobbing, trembling maiden.

"Better let her hev it out all to onceset, boss," muttered Ben, as the huge ruffian paused and scratched his enormous head with a doubting air. "It'll be easier to manidge her a'terwards."

"You're sure they ain't no mistake?"

"I've got her own word for it," grinned the decoy. "She says her pap's Colonel Markham—"

This speech was broken by a sudden disturbance near the camp-fire. Happy Jack had recovered his consciousness, and the thongs that pressed painfully into his flesh told him all in an instant. He put his whole strength in one superhuman attempt to burst his bonds, but failed. The fierce struggle displaced the saddles at his back, and he rolled over sideways, glaring defiance at the broadly-grinning fellows before him.

"You'll save yourself a heap o' trouble,

stranger, ef you'll jest take things easy as they come," grinned Watson, as he raised the bound scout once more to a sitting posture.

"So—I have *you* to thank for this," said Happy Jack, in a hard, strained voice. "Were you working on your own hook, or merely as an agent?"

"Well," replied the decoy, with the air of being well satisfied with himself, "I reckon I cooked up the plan, but that's the boss, by the gal—'Baby Tom' we call him, 'cause he's so little an' innocent. Mebbe you've hearn tell on him?"

"Be so kind as to ask him to step this way for a moment."

"Now that's sensible—I'm raally glad to see you takin' it so quiet, sence things can't be helped—"

"Yes, I am very quiet," interrupted the scout, with a little laugh. "So quiet that I wonder you don't cut these thongs."

Watson grinned but made no reply, and a minute later, leaving one of the men on guard over Kate, he returned with Baby Tom, as the giant was called.

"I wish to ask what we have done to deserve this treatment," said Happy Jack, as the two men paused before him.

"Tain't so much what ye've done as what we 'spect ye to do," replied Baby Tom. "An' not so much you as 'tis the gal yender. Fact I'd ruther you wasn't mixed up in it a-tall, but we couldn't git her 'thout ropin' you in too—see?"

"But what for—what do you hope to gain by it?" persisted the scout.

"I reckon the old man over yender to the fort thinks a heap o' her, don't he?"

"You mean to hold her for ransom, then?"

"Jes' so. I reckon we've struck a mighty rich lead this time!" and the overgrown scoundrel chuckled aloud.

"And your story was all a lie?" added Happy Jack, turning his head toward Watson, who replied, glibly enough:

"'Vention, stranger; gentlemen never lie. I'll tell ye the hull thing right off from eend to eend. I happened to be scoutin' 'round, sorter permiskous like, when I ketched sight o' you two runnin' from the red-skins. I saw you rub out them three, and then watched you take to the valley where the spring is. I crawled up nigh enough to make out who an' what you was, an' then I knewed they was big money in it, ef 'twas manidged right. So I skips back an' lets the boys know, an' gits two of 'em to go 'long with me. We 'tended to sneak up nigh enough to knock you over Injun fashion, to save bother, but you made us out fust. I knewed you was a tough hoss to carry, so we 'cluded to play bugs onto you—an' we did. I made up the hull yarn as I went along, an' ef I do say it, it hung together slicker'n grease. But the raaal science come in when I made you think mebbe the reds was up this-a-way, fer that give me a good excuse fer to come on ahead an' post the boys a little. They did thar part, an' I've done mine. Yours is yet to come."

"What is it you expect me to do?" asked Happy Jack, in an even tone, but with a growing fire in his eyes.

"To help make the trade," was the prompt reply.

"And if I refuse?"

"You won't be no sech fool—or, ef you do, you'll git jest the pizenest overhaulin' you ever see!"

"Now look here; you fellows are acting more like crazy fools than sober men. The only thing you'll ever make out of this precious scheme will be a long rope and a short shrift; Colonel Markham will hunt you down like wolves. Now take a sober look at it. Don't you see what fools you are making of yourselves? There's not one chance in fifty of your getting out of this scrape with a whole skin. There is one way—and only one, by which you can make a fair pile. Come with us to the fort, and I'll see that you are well paid for your trouble. If not—"

"What then?" growled Baby Tom.

"Then I swear to hunt you out—I've marked every one of you! If one hair of that lady's head is harmed, I'll have a life for it—"

"Ef you ain't a clean gone fool you'd better keep a short tongue atwixt your jaws," growled the giant. "You're a sweet-lookin' coon to talk 'bout huntin' us down! Better wait ontel it comes your say-so."

"You refuse to set us—or this lady—free, then?"

"M I a fool to take all this trouble fer nothin'? The gal kin go free when her old man shells out the dollars—not afore. Ef she ain't wuth that to him, I'll keep her fer my own squaw—tha!"

Baby Tom turned away from the scout, and after a few words with Ben Watson, stretched out his huge frame upon the ground, with feet toward the fire. The decoy hung a blanket before a narrow niche among the rocks, and flung another around Kate's shoulders.

"You'll find it comf'table enough in thar, an' I reckon you need some sleep. You needn't be frightened. You're wuth a heap too much money fer any o' the boys to even look cross-eyed at ye."

"And—that gentleman?" faltered Kate, with a glance at Happy Jack.

"He's a man an' must shift fer hisself. I don't mind tellin' ye, though, ef he'll do what's axed of him, he'll be let go when we get the money safe."

Kate hesitated for a moment, as though she would speak to the scout, but then the rude admiration of the men around seemed to shame her, and in silence she disappeared behind the blanket screen. She had heard enough since the capture to know that there was nothing to fear on her own account beyond a brief captivity. Colonel Markham would not hesitate long about paying the sum demanded as ransom, whatever measures he might afterward take. But Happy Jack—what would be his fate? And thinking of him, striving in vain to see some way through the difficulty, Kate fell asleep, nor did she awaken until the gray light in the east told of dawning day.

"I hated like sin to roust you out, miss," said Watson, apologetically, as Kate pushed the hanging blanket aside; "but it's 'most day, an' grub's ready, an' the boys is in a hurry to git out o' here. Ef you'd like a wash, mebbe you could manidge with this," doubtfully holding forth a battered canteen. "I could pour it on your han's, ef you say so. Wish't we's better fixed fer comp'ny, but it'll be better when we git home."

With a half-laugh at her curious handmaiden, Kate accepted his offer, thinking it wise to make the best of the situation, and felt much more like her usual self after the operation. Watson brought her some freshly-cooked meat and cold corn-cakes which were decidedly palatable. Kate saw that Happy Jack was not neglected, his hands being freed to allow him to eat and drink, though Baby Tom squatted near, a revolver resting upon his lap. Evidently the outlaws—if such they may be termed—were profoundly impressed with the prowess he had so recently shown, and were averse to running any chances.

The meal was a hasty one, and long before the sun cast its rays into the narrow valley, all were in the saddle and moving rapidly away from the camp. Kate rode her own mare, while Ben Watson, astride Simeoom, kept close to her side. With this exception there was nothing to show that she was a captive. Happy Jack did not fare so well. He was tied to the saddle, a rope passing beneath the horse's belly and connecting the scout's feet, while a thick bandage covered his eyes.

Guessing the reason for this precaution, Happy Jack endeavored to baffle it, but so many were their turns and windings that his mind grew confused, until he lost all idea of their course or whereabouts. The party pressed on at a fair rate until nearly noon, when they came to a halt. The scout was lifted from the saddle, and after some delay felt himself placed upon a litter. He knew that he was being carried up a steep ascent, then along a level stretch through many windings and sharp turns, finally being lowered to the ground. A minute later, the bandage was removed from his eyes. A brilliant light was before him, and presently he could make out his surroundings.

He seemed to be in an underground apartment. A rude slab table stood before him, around which were gathered a dozen or more men.

CHAPTER XII.

HARD PRESSED.

THE warning cry of Sergeant Bowen produced no little commotion among the band of adventurers surrounding the little spring, though there was none of the wild, nervous excitement that invariably marks the inexperienced, however brave.

"Fifty, you say? Keep back, boys—don't overrun the trail!" sharply cried Comstock, as he stooped low over the patch of moist turf that surrounded the water.

"Is it fight, or run?" asked Captain Stone, quietly.

Comstock made no reply for nearly a minute, when he arose from his examination of the trail with a grin of delight.

"They've met three whites—shod thar critters an' pulled out from here las' night. I reckon we'd best hunt a hole somewhars nigh here, an' hev it out with them red imps. It's got to come, an' we mought as well hev the pick o' the ground as to run the chainces o' farin' wuss. Which'll it be, boys?"

"We are under your command—what you say we will do," responded Sergeant Bowen, acting as mouthpiece for his comrades.

"Mount an' foller, then!" cried Comstock.

Rapidly they rode along the valley, following the scout's lead. His eyes were roving swiftly from side to side, and ere long an exclamation broke from his lips, and he drew rein at the foot of a rocky slope leading up to a goodly-sized ledge twenty yards above them.

"Light, hitch critters, then up yender an' git to work!" cried Comstock, seemingly all afire at the prospect of a speedy brush with his hated foes, the Sioux.

His orders were obeyed without a single question, the animals being fastened together by the

heads, and all made secure by a stout rope knotted around a sturdy shrub. Up the rude, irregular steps the nimble-footed scout sprung, setting the example by rolling one of the heavy bowlders—with which the platform was plentifully strewn—into position, near the edge of the ledge. A dozen stout men made short work of the task, knowing as they did that their stone breastworks would, in all probability, soon be severely tested.

"Now let 'em come!" chuckled Comstock, dashing the rolling perspiration from his brow. "They couldn't 'a' bin a better place ef we'd had it made to order! A buck goat couldn't climb them walls, an' we kin easy pick off every two-legged critter as tries to pass by. They's no place the imps kin git so they kin fire down on us, an' I reckon we're healthy enough to keep thar han's full a-climbin' up."

"It is a strong position, but we are short in rations. Suppose they take a notion to blockade us for a week or two?" suggested Captain Stone, in anything but a satisfied tone.

"We come out to help the old man's da'ter, didn't we? She went along this valley some time last night, with Happy Jack an' some others—white men. Now ef we keep these varmints back, they cain't hunt *them*, kin they? It'll give 'em a chance to work back to the fort, which in course they'll do. Then when we git tired o' stayin' here, why we'll jest out an' Wade right plum through them—Look yender! Squat down close! don't burn a grain o' powder afore I say so—mind, now!"

The keen-eyed scout had caught sight of Kenekuk and his two comrades as they followed the trail up the valley. A few moments later came the discovery, and it was Comstock's rifle that rung forth the death-knell of the Sioux brave as he turned back to inform the White Sioux of the discovery of the enemy's position.

Then came the swift, deadly charge—right on until the snorting mustangs were trampling the line of shrubbery beneath their feet—on until the leading braves sprung from the backs of their animals and landed upon the rude stone steps, yelling and screeching like fiends fresh loosed from Pandemonium, scarce pausing to fire a shot in answer to the storm of bullets pouring down from the smoke-wreathed barricade, seemingly bent on ending the matter with one swift stroke.

But Comstock had carefully chosen his men, and the worth of his judgment was now proven. Not a man faltered or betrayed one sign of either fear or indecision. This was not the first time by many that their lives had depended upon a single cast, and they proved equal to the work cut out for them. Rapidly as their firearms spoke, each bullet had its billet, and not one of the desperate savages reached the stone breastwork.

Foremost among the assailants were the White Sioux and his son, Kenekuk. Each seemed to bear a charmed life, for, though stout braves went down in death beside and behind them, as yet they had escaped a wound. But then the young brave faltered, his foot slipped and he would have fallen headlong upon the rocks below, had not the white chief caught him in his arms, though in so doing the father lost his balance. There was a brief, desperate struggle—then the two men rolled heavily down the rocks, almost sweeping it clear of the assailants.

The White Chief sprung up, bruised but not seriously hurt, the exultant cheers of the pale faces ringing in his ears. A single glance told him that the golden opportunity was past. It would be little short of madness to renew the assault, under the circumstances, and still clasping the limp form of Kenekuk in his arms, he gave the signal for retreat. In this, as in all else, he was obeyed without a single murmur, and, driving their mustangs before them, the surviving Sioux ran swiftly down the valley until safe cover was reached.

"Ef I didn't say so the devil's a hog!" laughed Comstock, in fierce glee. "The only fault is the pesky cowards run away too soon—Ha!"

The man who had fought at the scout's right hand arose while Comstock was speaking, and peered over the breastwork, curious to learn how effective their fire had been, but the next moment he whirled swiftly around and fell flat upon his face, a bullet through his head. The report came from almost directly below, and as Comstock glared down, he saw a crippled savage lying half beneath a dead warrior, and trying to bring another rifle to bear upon the breastwork. Before his weakening limbs could succeed, a pistol-bullet put an end to his sufferings, and Comstock's voice rung out, vindictively:

"Put a blue pill through the head of every imp down thar—make sure work this time!"

The order, barbarous as it may sound, was obeyed to the very letter. There is scant room for mercy when white and red meet face to face, to fight for the last stake man can play for. Generous chivalry is shown a fallen foe far more frequently upon paper than upon the border battle-fields of to-day. Cooper's great masterpiece—the glorious Natty Bumppo—would never have lived to wear gray hair had fortune placed him among the red-skins of to-day, and

James Harrod would have been scalped by the Indians whom he drew from the river—provided he himself did not turn barber first.

Save the one man, whose own imprudence caused his death, not one of the defenders had been killed, and only two of their number slightly wounded. On the whole they had good cause for rejoicing. Not a living savage was to be seen, though they well knew that the Sioux had not yet abandoned their purpose.

"They'll hold off until night, I reckon," quoth Comstock, filling his pipe. "They's jest two things fer us to do. One is to wait here an' give 'em another dose that'll sicken 'em fer good, or, when it gits dark enough to kiver us, to crawl down, mount our critters an' either ride chock through the imps, or else strike up the valley an' try to give 'em the slip in the dark. They's plenty o' time, so you fellers kin talk it over an' take your pick o' the two."

"Where do you suppose your friend, Happy Jack, is now?" asked Captain Stone, after a few minutes' silence.

"He's whar he kin do the most good—you kin bet on that," rather shortly retorted the scout. It was evident there was little love lost between the two men.

"You think those were friends he met at the spring?"

"Mebbe you see'd blood-marks, an' a dozen or so dead karkidges layin' round loose, but I didn't," sniffed Comstock, tartly. "I did see this, though. Three white men come up; them an' my pard had a confab; they cut up saddle-blankets an' muffled the hoofs of the two hosses. Miss Kate rid one of the critters, an' Happy Jack walked aside her. One stranger went on ahead, one come ahind an' the other led the loose hoss. Does that seem like they was inimies—say?"

"It looks as though they wished to hide their trail—but from whom? I can't understand that!"

"From the reds, who was bound to foller 'em up soon's they got through with us at the fort—of course."

Captain Stone was silenced, if not convinced, and for several hours scarce a word was spoken, the majority of the men taking advantage of the opportunity to catch a little much-needed sleep. Among these was Comstock, as soon as his pipe was smoked out, and he slept soundly until the hand of Sergeant Bowen was placed upon his shoulder.

"A flag of truce," he said, in answer to the unspoken question.

Comstock crawled to the barricade and peered forth. A tall man—whom he instantly recognized as the White Sioux—stood within one hundred yards of the stone fort, bearing a white rag upon a stick. He was unarmed, and alone.

"Well, what do you want, anyhow?" shouted the scout.

"You have a lady with you, whose life I would be very sorry to sacrifice. I do not ask you to surrender her to us, for I know you would refuse, as I would in your place. What I have to propose is this. Let the lady descend and take her position upon yonder ledge. It is not more than one hundred feet from your rifles, and you can cover every point. Until she reaches it, I pledge you my honor that none of my braves shall make a single motion to injure her or you."

"An' s'pose the lady don't choose to go?"

"Then her blood be upon her own head! If my offer is refused she will share your death. Within an hour, not one of your party will be alive."

"She saysshe won't go—so do your worst!"

Without another word the White Sioux turned and strode down the valley. A few moments later the white men saw a number of the savages, mounted, ride out and pause at long rifle-range.

"I reckon they mean another charge," said Comstock, with a chuckle of grim satisfaction. "Ready, boys, an' we'll give 'em a hotter dinner than they had afore!"

There was a brief pause, then, as though ready to lead his braves on, the White Sioux placed himself at their head. He raised one hand and uttered a shrill whoop.

A strange noise came from overhead, and then, like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, a huge mass of rock shot swiftly down, falling full upon the stone wall, crushing two men to shapeless pulp beneath its frightful weight.

CHAPTER XIII.

HAPPY JACK WRITES A LETTER.

IT required fully a minute before the long-bandaged eyes of the scout grew accustomed to the red, flickering torchlight. Then, hazy, indistinct outlines beyond the table grew clearer, and he recognized, among others, the presence of Baby Tom and Ben Watson. At the same moment he noticed a stumpy pen and a small pocket inkstand upon the table, beside a dingy oblong of paper, evidently a fly-leaf torn from some book.

"Now, stranger," briskly uttered Watson, coming around the table, evidently bent on business. "I reckon you've had time enough fer thinkin' over what we spoke to you about, so

we'll come to the p'int at once. Thar's pen, paper and ink, yender; you know how to handle 'em, I reckon?"

"I can write, yes; whether I will or no, is quite another thing," quietly answered the prisoner.

"Ef you act rusty, then we must coax ye," grinned the decoy. "The boss, yender, is powerful hefty on the coax, an' I never yet see the critter as could hold out ag'in him very long, when he was in plum airnest."

"Cut it short, Preacher Ben," growled Baby Tom, impatiently.

"Will you write what we ax of you, or not?" snapped the decoy. "Spit it out—yes or no?"

"You'll get nothing out of me while I am bound. Cut these thongs and then I'll listen to what you have to propose—not unless," firmly replied Happy Jack.

Watson cast an inquiring glance at Baby Tom. The giant promptly answered the unspoken question.

"Turn him loose. Ef he thinks to play any tricks, so much the wuss for him."

Watson drew his knife and severed the thongs that confined the scout's arms and feet, and even assisted him to arise—a task of no little difficulty, for Happy Jack found his limbs almost paralyzed. He leaned against the table chafing the benumbed members, and while thus occupied he made a discovery. The pen lying before him was thickly incrusted with rust, and he knew that it could not have been used for months, if not years. Might it not be that the outlaws were unable to write—or even to read writing? If so, there was yet a chance of fooling the ruslans.

His face gave no evidence of these thoughts as he drew his tall form erect and faced the giant.

"I am ready to hear what you have to say, gentlemen."

"Tell him, Preacher Ben," growled Baby Tom.

"You're to set down thar an' write a letter to Colonel Markham, tellin' him jest what I say. Fetch one o' them kags, Simpson. Let the gentleman take all the ease he kin."

Happy Jack accepted the proffered seat and cleaned the pen from rust as well as he was able, but his brain was busier than his fingers. If he could only discover whether any of the outlaws were able to read!

"Ef it takes you as long to write as it does to git ready, we'd better fetch in a mule-load o' grub!" grumbled Baby Tom, in a tone of disgust.

"I was thinking whether it was worth my while to write at all," coolly replied the scout. "If I do, I cannot go back to the fort—they would kick me out for a coward, even if they didn't accuse me of being in league with you fellows. Now what can you offer me to make up for this?"

"We'll give you back your weepins an' set you free. Isn't that enough?"

"There's still another way. Write the letter among yourselves, and then I needn't be brought forward at all, save as a prisoner. Agree to this and, poor scout as I am, I'll give you one hundred dollars as ransom the day I'm set free."

"Can't be did, stranger, and I'll tell ye why," quickly uttered Watson. "Fust, your handwritin' 'll be knowned at the fort. They'll know what you say kin be 'pended on, an' a letter from you'll have more fluence than then ef any o' us, strangers, 'd writ it. Ef you say so, they'll know that the lady hain't bin abused nor mistreated, only tuck captive fer ransom, which they wouldn't believe so soon, ef 'twas anybody else's fist. An' then—they ain't one o' us fellers as kin even write his own name, let alone stringin' together a hull letter."

Happy Jack's hopes sunk as Watson spoke, though the words themselves would seem to settle the important doubt in the very direction he had wished. But, contrary as it may sound, the scout would have been far better pleased had Watson declared that every man of them could both read and write. He knew that the decoy was no fool; the part he had played during the past night was enough to stamp him as a shrewd, clear-witted rascal, far too cunning to place a dangerous weapon in the hands of the tool he meant to use, unless he held a more powerful one in his own hand.

He felt almost certain that one at least was present who was intended to read the message when written, to satisfy the outlaws that all was as they wished.

These reflections passed through the scout's mind with wonderful rapidity, but his delay in answering was long enough to draw forth a growl of impatience from Baby Tom. In another moment his resolve was taken.

"There's one point still that I cannot understand. You must know that I can have but little love for you. A man is not made a fool of, knocked down and tied up as you have served me for nothing, and if he has any blood left in his veins at all, he is going to watch for a chance to get even. Now you say that none of you can either read or write. What is to hinder me from giving the colonel plain directions for finding this place, with your numbers, and any other information that would be likely to be

of service, instead of writing what you bid me?"

"I knowed you'd think o' that," laughed Watson. "But we've fixed it all right. You'll be kept a close pris'ner ontel after we've got the money safe in our hands. We'll send the letter by a sure hand, an' ef he doesn't come back, safe an' sound, inside o' two days, we'll jest lift your skulp an' put it out with the gal, holdin' her a reasonable time fer ransom, which ef it don't come, then we've agreed Baby Tom thar shell have her fer a squaw. Now, jest take a fool's advice, stranger. Give over any notion you may hav of playin' bugs onto us, fer it won't work, an' I'll only be wuss fer you an' the lady. Write down jest what you're told, an' thank your stars you're dealin' with gentlemen 'stead o' low down varmints as 'd make use o' ye an' then rub you out to make sure you shouldn't never try to pay 'em back in thar own kyne."

"Very well. I will do what you ask, since I can do no better. Tell me just exactly what you wish me to say, and I'll put it down in the best shape I can," quietly responded Happy Jack.

"Now you show your good sense, an' we won't fergit it of ye when settlin' time comes," exclaimed Watson, approvingly. "Listen, gentlemen, an' ef I miss any o' the p'ints, why you kin set me right. Fust, tell the old man how you got away from the red-skins, but putt it short. Then you went into camp, an' was surrounded by a wheen o' Crows. We come along an' run them away, reskin' our skulps a-doin' of it. We're pertly hard up, an' think what we done was wuth say five thousan' dollars. We've tuck sech a fancy to you an' the lady that we've cluded to keep you as comp'ny ontel the money's paid. Ef the old man thinks what we did is wuth the money, he kin say so, an' the gentleman as brings him this letter 'll make all the rangements fer the swap. Ef he don't—waal, I reckon he'll hav to hunt up another da'ter, fer he'll never lay two eyes on this 'un ag'in. Thar!" and Watson drew a long breath of relief and satisfaction at having safely delivered himself. "I reckon that's about the thing. Ef any o' you kin think o' any 'mendments, don't be bashful, but spit 'em right out!"

The company seemed to consider that all had been said that was necessary, and then Watson ordered the prisoner to transcribe his words.

"Putt it down in your own way, but mind an' don't say any more'n what I told you," he added.

Without a word, his face betraying nothing of the real anxiety that filled his mind, Happy Jack wrote Colonel Markham's name at the top of the paper, then adding:

"After a long chase, I succeeded in rescuing Miss Markham from the six Sioux who were sent in pursuit of her yesterday. The chase lasted until sunset—forty miles or more, and her horse was too jaded to travel further. We went into camp beside the spring, near the mouth of Crooked Valley. In the night three white men visited us, and said Indians were lurking around, and induced us to set off for their camp, where we would be safe. We were there taken prisoners, by fourteen men, led by one Baby Tom. They demand five thousand dollars as ransom for Miss Markham. They threaten my life if I say any thing of their force or location, but in hopes that none of them can read, I am running the risk. Detain the bearer of this. Put thirty men under command of Bill Comstock. Let him follow our trail from the mouth of Crooked Valley; or, better still, pass up the valley for nearly three miles, when he will find upon the left hand a small plateau, where he can see traces of the encampment of last night. The horse-trail leading from that spot will be easily followed. I was blindfolded, and hence am unable to describe our course. I believe we are now in some sort of a cave. You will not have, at most, more than twenty men to deal with. As yet Miss Markham has been fairly treated, but black threats are made if you fail to ransom her."

To this Happy Jack signed his name, then pushed the paper over to Watson. That was a moment of horrible suspense, when the decoy peered keenly at the well-filled page, and the scout felt that his life trembled in the balance. But then Watson passed the paper over to Baby Tom, who, after eying the words owlishly for a moment, spoke:

"Go fetch my old woman, Simpson. We'll see ef the lad has bin tryin' to fool us."

Happy Jack met the suspicious glare with an unmoved countenance, though his heart beat fast as he found his worst misgivings were about to be realized. He had fallen into the trap so cunningly set for him, and felt that he had sacrificed his life for nothing. He made no motion, but summoning all his powers, resolved to make one desperate struggle, unarmed though he was, rather than tamely submit.

He was not kept long in suspense. Simpson soon returned, accompanied by a middle-aged woman, dressed almost wholly after the style of an Indian squaw. She was of unmixed blood, though, and still bore traces of beauty, even through the deep lines imprinted by care and trouble.

In silence she took the paper extended by Baby Tom, and glanced rapidly over it. Then, in a low, monotonous voice, she began to read. If, at first glance, Happy Jack still hoped, he was speedily undeceived, for the woman began reading, word for word, just as he had written!

CHAPTER XIV.

PRESSING THE SIEGE.

WHEN the endeavor to save his wounded son from an awkward fall resulted so disastrously, the White Sioux saw that there was nothing left for it but retreat to await a more favorable opportunity. Flushed with their complete success thus far, he knew that the whites would fight with redoubled desperation. Knowing this, he lifted the limp form of Kenekuk in his arms, and uttering a peculiar cry, ran swiftly down the valley, followed by his surviving braves. When safe around the turn and beyond reach of the viciously-whistling bullets, the white chief gently lowered his burden to the ground, and with a face strangely anxious for one of his heartless reputation, examined the young warrior's injuries.

A pistol-bullet had plowed its way through the young brave's cheek, inflicting a wound more painful than dangerous. In addition he bore wounds in shoulder and breast, besides sundry severe bruises received in falling down the sloping rocks. Not until he had satisfied himself that these injuries, though troublesome, were not likely to endanger his son's life, did the White Sioux have thoughts for aught else. He gave a few hurried directions to his braves. They were to keep close watch upon the whites, and hold themselves in readiness for a charge, should they endeavor to improve their temporary advantage by taking to flight. Then, aided by an old, battle-scarred warrior, he washed and bandaged the wounds of his son, who speedily recovered his consciousness under their treatment.

When this was accomplished, the White Sioux for the first time realized how heavy had been his loss during that brief charge and stubborn assault. Thirteen of his men had fallen, besides the scout who was slain by Comstock. And he seemed as far as ever from accomplishing his purpose.

Passing around the turn, he paused within full view of the stone fort. Leaning back against the rocks, he studied every point of the enemy's position, a dark frown corrugating his brow. But then the shade began to lessen, and a hard smile crept over his features, as he abandoned his position and returned to where the majority of his braves were awaiting.

"The white faces are laughing now, but they will weep blood before the sun is over their heads. Their retreat is a trap; we will show them how to spring it. There is danger, but danger is the food of the Sioux. Listen, and I will show my children how they can pick up the scalps of the white horse-stealers."

Into eager ears the White Sioux poured the bold and dangerous plan he had formed while engaged in inspecting the stone fort. As already stated the ledge upon which the whites had sought refuge, somewhat resembled the sloping cut made by a skillful woodsman in felling a tree, with an important exception. The wall of rock which formed the back did slope forward, as it rose above the ledge, but a line dropped from its outermost point would strike the shelf several feet inside of the barricade. After rising almost perpendicularly from this point for several rods the line grew broken and irregular, full of cracks and crevices as it sloped back to the summit.

The White Sioux believed he could station marksmen upon several of these points, from which they could fire down upon the defenders of the stone fort, as long as any of them remained near the barricade. Of course, by retreating to the rear wall the defenders would be safe from the enemy above, but by doing so they could no longer command the foot of the range, nor full fifty yards of the level ground. A swift charge would speedily carry the assailants within this line, when the whites could only fire upon them or resist their ascent by coming within range of the marksmen overhead.

It was a cunning plan, and only for the peremptory command of the White Sioux would have been hailed with wild yells of satisfaction by his dusky adherents. The chief selected six braves for the enterprise, giving them a brief but clear explanation of the signals by which he would govern their movements. Their weapons were a brace of revolvers each and stout rawhide lassoes. Thus equipped the six braves ran swiftly toward the mouth of the valley until at a point where the ridge could be crossed with comparative ease and at the same time beyond view from the pale-faces' position.

Half an hour of arduous work carried them to the crest of the ridge directly back of the stone fort, and then began the real labor, where, but for their ropes, and through confidence in each other, the enterprise must have failed. With a lasso firmly secured beneath his arms, a young Sioux led the way, crawling from point to point, where a mountain-goat could barely have stood, or lowered cautiously by the strong arms of his comrades above. When at a favorable point he would release the lasso and await the coming of a second brave, while the Sioux who brought up the rear would secure his lasso to a rock and descend by its aid, leaving the rope when it could no longer aid him.

In this manner the adventurers slowly but

surely neared the goal, guided and encouraged by the silent signals of their chief, who watched their progress from a point beyond the sight of the unsuspecting pale-faces below. An occasional glimpse of his form was indeed welcome, and without the knowledge that his approving eye was upon them it may well be doubted whether the Sioux, brave though they were, would have persisted in the attempt, so rapidly did the dangers increase. The footing grew more and more precarious, the rocks seeming frost-eaten and splintered, threatening to fall at the slightest touch, and when within a lasso's length of the points from whence alone they could hope to gain a view of those beneath, the six braves gathered together for the purpose of consultation.

It was evident to all that the points of rock overhanging the ledge would not bear the weight of a man, even with the utmost caution, much less with the sudden movements he would have to use in order to avoid being picked off from the ledge after firing upon the whites. Blindly obedient to their chief though they were, it is not Indian nature to sacrifice his life without even a hope of striking a return blow.

Knowing that the chief was watching them, one of the braves knotted the rope around his body and was slowly lowered toward the balanced rocks. For a moment he hung just above them, peering keenly down, then motioned his comrades to draw him up again. Fearing to speak there, he signed for them to crawl further up, finally revealing the discovery he had made. A single man, supported by a rope, in trusty hands, could easily destroy the barricade below by simply pushing over the huge masses of shattered rock, but in no other manner could the whites be molested from above, except at the cost of certain death to the adventurer. The chief must at once be informed of the alteration necessarily made in the programme, so he could play his part accordingly.

The surest-footed brave volunteered to carry the tidings, and after agreeing upon certain signals by means of which he could at once inform the five warriors of the decision, he began the toilsome ascent.

From his look-out the White Sioux saw that something had gone wrong, and watched the climbing brave with anything but amiable feelings. He had counted so surely upon success that the idea of failure was bitter indeed. In silence he awaited the arrival of the messenger, but a hot glow filled his eyes as he listened to the report. The prospect of success was even brighter than when he believed his bold plan was working to perfection.

He hastily gave his warriors their instructions, making sure that each one fully understood what was expected of him, and while they were making their preparations, he improvised a flag of truce and leaving his weapons behind boldly advanced toward the stone fort. The brief colloquy that followed has already been recorded, and the reader knows why the chief's really sincere desire to preserve the life of Kate Markham, whom he firmly believed to be upon the ledge, was baffled.

Retracing his steps, the White Chief secured his weapons and mounted his horse, after seeing that all was in readiness. Then he gave the decisive signal, and the expectant braves upon the hillside put their plans into operation. Two braves were lowered at different points, and placing their feet against the masses of loose rock selected, endeavored to topple them over. One was instantly successful, the ponderous mass yielding to the impulse and thundering down upon the ledge, crushing two of the defenders out of all semblance of the human form, destroying full one-third of the barricade, then toppling over and crashing down the slope into the midst of the terror-stricken horses, killing two and setting the remainder free. A moment later the second mass descended, but though it struck fairly upon the stone wall, the horrified whites had sprung back beneath the sheltering rock, and no one was injured.

At the moment the first rock was seen to fall, the White Sioux sounded his war-whoop and led the charge. As he drew within range, he sunk behind the body of his mustang, an example followed by each of his braves; but instead of riding straight at the fort, he veered to the left and sped past, pausing only when beyond rifle-range up the valley, performing the feat without the loss of a warrior, though several hasty shots were discharged from the fort.

The instant after the horsemen opened their charge, five Sioux, upon foot, their rifles slung upon their backs, broke cover and darted swiftly up the valley. Each brave bore in his arms a large bundle of freshly-cut brush—mainly short stemmed, bushy cedars. Separating, they rushed on, each one gaining positions behind the boulders they had previously selected, before a single shot was fired at them by the confused defenders of the stone fort, whose whole attention was occupied by the strange maneuvers of the horsemen under the White Sioux. A yell of wild exultation broke from the lips of the savages as they saw how completely their ruse had succeeded. The white men, too, saw that a serious danger menaced them, and sent a volley of bullets toward the boulders where

the five braves crouched, but it was only a waste of ammunition.

Coolly and cautiously the braves completed their preparations. The sharpened stems of the cedars were thrust into the ground, so that their tops formed a hedge around the boulders. Another was secured to the top of the rock, while smaller pieces were bound around the Indians' heads. By this means, the ambushed marksmen could fire from several different points without danger of being seen by the white men, who, in return, could only fire at random.

Two more masses of rock were sent down from above, and the stone barricade was almost demolished. The concealed marksmen opened a brisk and telling fire, and the whites were forced to crouch low down against the rear wall to avoid being picked off.

The White Sioux saw that the moment for decisive action had come, and giving a signal for the braves above to cease their labors, he dismounted and led his braves on foot along the foot of the rocks, completely covered by the screened marksmen beyond. Their progress was swift but noiseless. They bore only revolvers, knives and hatchets, resolved to end all at one stern grapple, hand-to-hand.

They reached the foot of the blood-stained slope, and then, in line, began the ascent. Not a sound came from the defenders above, though the scraping of moccasined feet upon the slippery rocks must have met their ears. Were they too thoroughly cowed for even a show of resistance?

Up the red braves crawled, until their heads were scarce a yard below the edge of the shelf. Then, with a wild yell, they sprung forward, the White Sioux at their head!

CHAPTER XV.
A FRIEND IN NEED.

In a low, monotonous tone the woman read on, word for word, as Happy Jack had transcribed them. To describe the scout's sensations would be impossible, though his face, cold and impassive as marble, betrayed no emotion. With one quick glance he had decided upon his course. At the end of the table nearest his right hand stood Ben Watson, eagerly listening to the words as they fell from the woman's lips. Against his hip hung a revolver, which might be seized by a quick and resolute hand. Another moment, and the discovery must be made. Happy Jack was just on the point of leaping forward when—could he believe his ears?

Instead of reading what he had written, the woman was repeating, almost word for word, the directions given him by Ben Watson!

At the scout's involuntary start, the decoy turned quickly, suspicion in his snaky eye, but Happy Jack was equal to the occasion, and carelessly shifted his position upon the keg, as though finding its sharp chines an uncomfortable seat, and Watson appeared satisfied.

"Is there anything more you wish of me?" asked the woman, in the same cold, measured tone, as she extended the paper to Baby Tom.

"Only to see your back, that's all," replied the giant, with a brutal laugh. "Go 'tend to the lady, and mind—none o' your lies! You're so fond o' gabbin', some o' these days you'll lose your tongue—puckacheel!"

"Well," said Happy Jack, when the woman had disappeared amid the gloom, "are you satisfied with what I have written? I don't think I missed any important points."

"Couldn't 'a' done better ef I'd writ it myself," put in Watson. "Mebbe we'll make up a puss fer you—"

"I'll come out o' your pocket, then," growled Baby Tom. "He kin be thankful we don't slit his throat and chuck him in the first hole we see."

"I wouldn't take your money were you to offer it. All I ask is decent treatment. Since I have complied with all you have required of me, the least you can do in return is to let me out on parole—"

"Too thin, boss," grinned Watson. "Twon't do to run the risk of havin' two stories git to the fort. You don't git a chance to leave this afore the money is paid an' all things settled fa'r an' squar'. An' to save the trouble o' some one's settin' up with ye, I reckon you'd better let us putt on these ropes ag'in."

"You'll be sorry for this, some time," was all that Happy Jack said, as he submitted to the inevitable.

He was bound hand and foot, his hat pulled far down over his eyes, then placed upon the rude litter. Watson, carrying the light, led the way through a winding passage for some distance, finally pausing before a small niche in the wall. The prisoner was rolled from the litter, and after a few mocking words, the outlaws traced their steps.

Happy Jack's first idea was to get rid of the hat, which feat he soon accomplished by rubbing his head against the floor. Then he thoroughly tested the strength of his bonds, only to find that they were too strong and had been too carefully applied for him to either burst or slip them off. There was nothing for it but to wait as patiently as he might until the letter he had written should perform its mission.

He had much to think of. There was his first meeting with Kate Markham, closely followed by the thrilling events of attack, pursuit and rescue—events that had seemed to bring them so close together, to make them better acquainted than would a year of ordinary intercourse. Then of the cunning plot they had fallen victims to—the captivity—and that strange woman who had played such an unaccountable part: who and what was she? Why had she befriended him at the expense of those who were plainly her companions, if not friends. Would she also befriend Kate?

And, thinking of all these things, the scout, despite his bonds, fell soundly asleep, breathing as peacefully as though danger was a thing unknown.

How long he slept, whether it was hours or only minutes, Happy Jack never knew, but when his eyes opened to the inky blackness, his every sense was fully alive. All was still as death, yet he felt that some unusual sound had awakened him. He felt it in every nerve—that peculiar sensation we all have felt, at one time or another.

Now, as he listened with painful keenness, he caught a faint, rustling sound, that seemed gradually drawing nearer—a sound that might be made by a man stealing cautiously upon a sleeping foe, knife in hand; and for a moment he believed that some one of the outlaws was come to murder him, since they had, as they believed, the only service they could expect or wish. A moment's reflection, however, showed him the folly of this idea. Baby Tom was not the man to take so much trouble, when a single pistol-shot would have answered as well, the moment he was satisfied that the letter was written in strict accordance with his views.

"Hist!" came a low, cautious whisper. "I am a friend, come to serve you, if I can."

"Who are you?" muttered the scout, in the same guarded tones.

The woman who read your letter to those ruffians. I have waited until they are all asleep, except the two men standing guard before the entrance. If you can pass them, you are safe."

"And the—the lady? I will not attempt to escape without her."

"I expected you would say as much, nor do I blame you. But consider. You can do her no good while you remain here, a bound captive, but you can serve her, once a free man. It is rank folly to even dream of her sharing your flight, at night, and possibly pursued. You must go alone."

"And desert her? What would she think?"

"That you were acting rightly. She knows what I am doing. She bade you hasten to her father for aid. She will be treated fairly, because these men love gold even more than they do women. Come—your answer? Every moment you linger lessens your chances. Refuse, and to-morrow you may be a dead man. I saved you once, by reading that letter falsely—I was listening when Watson gave you your directions—but there are two men belonging to the band who can read, though they are off now, on some duty. If they should return—"

"If she bids me go, I will obey. But can it be done?"

"If you are cool and skillful, as I think. I have brought you weapons—they are loaded, and will not fail you. And you can have this knife, when I have cut your bonds—so! Take the cords with you, and that will be one clew the less for them, and may prevent suspicion from falling upon me. Now listen, and mark my words well. Give me your hand—there. Keep your hand upon this wall, follow it carefully until it leads you into the place where you wrote your letter. Then follow the left-hand wall; it will guide you to the passage leading to the opening where two men are standing guard. The chances are you will find them asleep. If so, you can slip by without an alarm. If not—but that you can answer as well as I. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly—but why—that is—"

"You wonder why I am trying to defeat the plans of the men I am living with? Some day you may understand, but there is no time now. Surely I have risked enough to prove that I am sincere?"

"I would as soon doubt my own mother! I thank you—some time I hope to prove how grateful I am—"

"I ask no thanks. Follow my directions, and may God prosper you! Wait here while you can count two hundred. By that time I will be safe back to my charge."

Without another word, the woman glided away, leaving Happy Jack in a state little short of bewilderment. It seemed like a dream—but he knew that his limbs were free, that he was well armed, that he was given a fair chance for life and freedom, and his usual coolness soon returned.

First, counting the number mentioned, he crept noiselessly along the wall as directed, reaching the chamber and finding the passage beyond, just as described by his strange friend. With revolver cocked and ready for use, he stole forward with increased caution, in a few moments reaching a point from whence he

could catch a faint glimpse of the stars through the cave entrance. But then he paused, fairly stilling his breath.

Directly before him, dimly visible against the sky-line, he could just distinguish the figures of two men, side by side, apparently seated upon the ground directly before the entrance. And as he listened, he could hear them conversing, in low, guarded tones. To pass them undiscovered was clearly impossible, yet he feared to delay, lest some one coming to relieve them should stumble across him.

In an instant the scout's resolve was taken. Gently lowering the hammer of his revolver, and turning the cylinder so there would be no danger of exploding a cap, he crept forward as far as he dared, then arose and with one bound stood close behind the men. Swift as thought the heavy pistol rose and fell, once, twice, then Happy Jack plunged down the slope just as an angry yell of rage and pain echoed through the air. His first blow had been sure and deadly, but the second outlaw was already rising in alarm, and the brass-bound butt merely grazed his skull, falling upon his shoulder.

Happy Jack reached the foot of the hill in safety, then dashed on through the darkness at what seemed a reckless rate. He knew that the alarm was given—the whole hill seemed in an uproar—and hoped to pass beyond earshot before the outlaws could fix his course. This was the more essential since he was in complete ignorance of his present whereabouts, and of the broken, dangerous ground around him. The stars would show him the general course he must pursue in order to reach the fort, but the darkness was so intense that there was great danger of his falling into some pitfall, unless he could proceed with great caution. For this reason he deemed it wiser to risk a fall in the attempt to gain a safe distance at the outset, than to have those upon his trail who, thoroughly conversant with the locality, could easily drive him into a trap from which escape might be impossible.

Fortune stood his friend, and he covered fully half a mile without accident more serious than several stumbles over unseen bowlders. He could hear the signals of the outlaws as they scattered in pursuit, but after he turned into a little ravine that led to the south, these grewainter, until at last he could hear nothing to arouse his suspicions.

This ravine led into a wider valley, and for an hour longer Happy Jack pressed on, and finally turned into a wide ravine, or pocket-like cleft in the rocks. He knew that there was danger of running afoul his enemies in the dark, while, well armed, he need fear them but little in daylight. Reasoning thus, he resolved to lie in cover until the sun enabled him to make out his exact location.

Pressing through the bushes, Happy Jack found himself in a cozy enough place. There was a niche below the rear wall, full of dried leaves, and crawling into this, he lay down with a sensation of delightful repose.

But he was not to enjoy this long. A suspicious sound came to his ear—and a moment later he distinguished the low sound of human voices. Cocking his revolver, he awaited the result. His suspense was short. The voices ceased just before the entrance to the pocket. There was a momentary silence, after which the stiff bushes began to rustle, as though somebody was endeavoring to force an entrance.

The bushes parted—and the hunted man could faintly distinguish the figure of a man before him!

CHAPTER XVI.

STRANGELY SAVED.

As the ponderous rock fell into their midst, ending the earthly career of two of their number, the defenders of the fort were utterly bewildered. Not the faintest sound had heralded the fall of the terrible missile—the hand of fate seemed in it, and more than one of the men shrunk back and covered their eyes with their hands, afraid to look upon the death they believed came from more than mortal might. Scarcely less superstitious than his red-skinned foeman is the unlettered plainsman even to the present day, and few men ever placed more implicit faith in good and bad "medicine" than Bill Comstock, and the majority of his companions shared this faith. Believing as they did that the rocks above were absolutely inaccessible to man, the falling of the mass of rocks was accepted as indubitable evidence that their medicine was bad indeed.

This belief will account for the little danger which attended the White Sioux's headlong charge past the stone fort, as all but three of the surviving defenders—Captain Stone, Sergeant Bowen and Walt Obermeyer—were cowering against the wall in superstitious dread. Had the Sioux charged the fort at that moment there is little doubt but what they would have gained an easy victory.

When the second rock fell, unlike the first, it gave warning by a dull, cracking, grating sound that opened among others Bill Comstock's eyes. He saw it fall, and, among the dust and fragments which followed, he saw a moccasin. As

this touched the ledge he sprung forward and caught it. A single glance was enough. It was Sioux make, and was yet warm from the warrior's foot—that told the whole story! A yell of great relief burst from his lips; but the harm had been done. The five Sioux were just dropping down behind the bowlders, not sixty yards from the stone fort.

In a few words Comstock made known his discovery, reasoning rightly that the moccasin had been torn from the foot of one of the redskins, through whose agency the masses of rock had been overthrown.

"It's a pity you couldn't see as much before," said Captain Stone, grimly. "Had you stood up to the rack, those devils couldn't have reached the rocks. As it is, the first man who shows his head will get it bored through for his pains."

"It's human natur' to make mistakes, cap'n," quietly responded Comstock, though his cheek flushed hotly. "When the rub comes we'll see which man does the best work."

There were few more words spoken. After the one volley at the ambushed Sioux, the ten surviving men drew back close to the rear wall, crouching low down, sternly awaiting the final struggle, which they felt assured would not be long delayed.

Their barricade was almost entirely destroyed, and the little that remained afforded no protection. The savage marksmen were posted where they could deliberately pick off any man who might attempt to stand erect. There was but one thing they could do: maintain their crouching position until the enemy made their assault and depend upon their pistols for picking off the savages as fast as they became visible above the escarpment.

They were not kept long in suspense. The five Sioux opened a steady fire, aiming their weapons so the bullets, just missing the edge of the shelf, would strike the sloping wall a few feet above the white men's heads. The flattened bullets made more than one wound, in glancing, until the whites, crouching still lower, crept out a few feet from the wall.

In stern silence, with weapons cocked and ready, the besieged heard the cautious advance of the Sioux under the White Chief. On and up they could hear the moccasined feet draw nearer—then came a pause, followed by a volley from the five rifles from the valley beyond.

The White Sioux sounded his war-cry—the savages, in a line that extended along the entire ledge, showed their heads and shoulders above the level—the revolvers barked loudly, and the death-struggle was fairly begun.

The White Sioux was first upon the ledge, but he was closely followed by a dozen braves, despite the hot and deadly fire. The pale-faces met them breast to breast, with knife and revolver. There was no quailing. Each man knew that he was fighting for sweet life.

At such close quarters, with such terrible odds against them, escape seemed impossible to the whites, desperately as they might struggle. And yet, saved the majority were, by one of those strange coincidences which sometimes occur, despite the smile of incredulity one cannot avoid, while reading.

Just when victory seemed in his grasp—when his warriors were crowding the white men against the wall—the White Sioux, in a voice that overpowered the devilish uproar, uttered the signal of retreat. His braves seemed wonderstruck—but sharp and peremptory the signal was repeated, and the power of discipline was once more exemplified. As one man the Sioux turned and followed their chief over the ledge.

It would be a difficult task to express the bewildered wonder of the white men at this sudden and unaccountable reprieve. A single minute more would have completed the savage work—they were well-nigh helpless; and now!

From the valley below came the loud voice of the White Sioux, and mechanically their glances turned in that direction. They saw a horse and rider; and the latter seemed a glorious vision, rather than a mortal being. It was a woman—young, and almost unearthly beautiful. Her garb was that of a squaw, but rich and covered with glistening beads and golden ornaments. She was gesticulating rapidly, though her voice was drowned by the outcry of the Sioux as they rushed toward her, led by the White Chief. Just before they gained her side she wheeled her horse and rode swiftly down the valley, followed at speed by the savages, neither pausing nor casting a glance backward until beyond the curve and hidden from the wondering stare of the men within the stone fort.

"Better reload—they may return," said Sergeant Bowen, who was the first to recover from the sort of stupor that had fallen upon the party.

"Well enough to load, but they won't come back—she won't let 'em," muttered Comstock.

"Do you know her? who and what is she?" quickly asked Captain Stone.

"Yes, I know her—leastways I've seen her afore. If she ain't a angel, I'll never tell you what she is."

"An angel such as many a man would give a

year of his life to clasp in his arms," Stone laughed, sharply.

"The less you say about her in that way, the longer you'll live, cap'n—mind my words," replied Comstock, sternly, his eyes sparkling wickedly.

"A flame of yours—you show admirable taste, I must confess. But whoever she may be, she saved our lives when our scalps were fairly being raised. A pity she had not put in an appearance sooner," and Stone cast a regretful glance around him.

"They fit like men, an' they died like men; God rest thar souls!" said Comstock, in a strangely-softened voice.

But five men remained alive of the thirteen who had stolen forth from Fort Western the night before. And of the survivors, only one had passed through the fiery ordeal untouched. Though risking his life freely as the boldest, Captain Stone had preserved his reputation of being a "lucky man." Bullets and steel seemed to pass him by as though his person was charmed. More than one man firmly believed that the devil watched over his own.

"While you are patching up your wounds, I'll slip down and see where those red hounds have gone," said Stone.

"They've rid clean off," confidently added Comstock; "but you kin satisfy yourself, only make haste back."

Fifteen minutes later the officer returned and reported that the Indians had left the valley, were even then riding at hot speed back toward the fort. Meantime the men had rudely bandaged their injuries, and Comstock had keenly scrutinized the rocks above them. It did not seem possible that the savages who had overturned the rocks could have retreated so quickly, but if they had not, they were so securely hidden among the spurs and crevices as to defy discovery unless by actual search. To guard against a possible volley, Comstock placed one man on the watch, with a rifle left by some Indian, while the other four men brought down the dead bodies of their late comrades for the purpose of burial. A lack of proper tools made this ceremony an exceedingly primitive one. A narrow rift in the rocks served for grave and coffin. The bodies were placed therein, and protected from any prowling wild beast by being covered over with heavy boulders.

"They deserve a better show than this," said Comstock, when the rift was closed in; "an' ef I live to git back to the fort, they shell hev it, too!"

"What is to hinder our getting back? The Indians are gone—your angel will see to that."

"I don't know—thar's trouble a-comin', an' that soon. What it is, I cain't say, but I kin feel it," replied the scout, in a strangely-subdued tone.

It was quite dark when the burial was completed, and after a brief consultation, it was decided to fall back further into the hills, to await the new day. Each man had received a rifle and plenty of ammunition from the slain Sioux, and, led by Comstock, they pushed up the valley, after a couple of miles leaving it for a pass which veered round toward the direction of Fort Western, nor did they pause until quite midnight.

"This is as good a place as any, I reckon," muttered Comstock. "We kin build a fire in thar 'thout danger of its bein' seen."

Followed by the others, he pressed through a dense screen of bushes, entering a sort of pocket in the rocks. Kneeling down he quickly raked together a lot of dried leaves and twigs, which blazed up merrily as a match was applied.

"Bill—old fellow!" cried a well-known voice, and the tall form of Happy Jack stepped out into the circle of light. "The very man I wished most to see—but how came you here?"

"We came after you an' the lady—I don't see her—"

"It's a long story, friend, and not the most pleasant—"

"She is alive—Miss Markham!" eagerly cried Stone.

"She was when I saw her last," coldly replied the scout.

"When was that—and where? She was in your charge. What have you done with her?" added Stone, with increasing excitement.

"If the lady was in my charge, I don't admit your right to question me. You will learn the facts all the sooner by listening."

Happy Jack briefly but clearly detailed all that had transpired since the sudden onset of the Sioux, speaking more particularly to Comstock and completely ignoring the exclamations and comments of the half-maddened officer.

But there is a limit to all things, and so there was to the patience of Happy Jack, when Captain Stone exclaimed:

"And you abandoned her there—left her to the mercy of those scoundrels—stole away like a coward—!"

"You will have it, then?" grated the scout, whirling around and dealing the captain a blow, straight from the shoulder, that hurled him headlong into the bushes, where he lay until Sergeant Bowen pulled him forth by the heels.

CHAPTER XVII. BAD BLOOD.

CONFUSED, half stunned and nearly blinded, Captain Stone staggered to his feet as soon as the sergeant released him from the brush, and drew a revolver from his belt while glaring around in search of the scout. Perhaps it was fortunate for him that the swift, heavy stroke had, in a measure, impaired his eyesight, for, white with a stern, deadly anger, Happy Jack stood covering the officer with his pistol, only waiting for the soldier to attempt to raise his weapon.

Bowen, Obermeyer and Martin sprung aside, not caring to stop bullets with their bodies which were intended for some other, but not so Bill Comstock. With a catlike bound he was beside Stone, wrenching the pistol from his grasp with a force that would not be denied.

"The fust one o' you as tries to burn powder 'll never pull trigger ag'in!" he cried, sharply, falling back a couple of paces and covering each man with a pistol. "Sw'ar to me you'll let the matter drop for to-night—out with it, quick! Yes or no!"

"He struck me!" snarled Stone.

"Cause you insulted him—if he hadn't, I'd a' licked him! You're even so fur. But that don't matter. I'm boss of this party, an' what fightin' thar is I'm goin' to have a han' in. Ef you're dead gone fer a muss, I'm your turtle-dove!"

"The gentleman's quarrel is with me, not you, Bill," said Happy Jack, smiling, despite his rage. "This has been brewing ever since we first laid eyes on each other, and since it must come, this is as good a time as another. Give the gentleman his weapon, and if he prefers it, measure off his own distance—"

"Ef it's got to be that way, I'll stand between an' blow thunder out o' ye both. Now look here. Thar's reason in all things—or they should be, which mounts to just the same. Gimme your word o' honor, all two both on ye, that you'll hear me reason clean through, an' I promise that ef you ain't satisfied, to stan' aside an' let you blaze away from now to sun-up."

"The matter rests with Captain Stone."

"Nothing you can say will make any difference, but as you insist, so be it. Only—cut it short," said the officer, in something like his natural voice.

"Here's your wepon, cap'n. I 'pologize fer snatchin' it 'thout stopping to say by your leave, but I was in too big a hurry jest then fer perliteness," and from the bright twinkle in the scout's eyes it was plain that he was very well satisfied with the result of his interference. "You fellers kin come in out o' the bresh now; the circus is over fer to-night."

Comstock squatted down beside the fire and coolly cut a pipeful of tobacco from a plug, nor did he speak until this task was accomplished. The others were as silent. If the storm had momentarily blown over, there was still thunder in the air.

"Now then—fust an' fo'most, we're out on duty. We left the fort to help the old man's daughter. We swore we'd fetch her in or go under a-tryin'. She got shet of the red-skins, thanks to my pard thar; but she's tumbled right into a wuss nest, almost. So much fer so much. Now I hold that we hain't no right to waste any time in simply 'musin' of ourselves, when we hain't finished up our work. That's why I putt in when you two gentlemen was argufyin' jest now. I know you hate each other like p'ison, an' I know, too, that thar's nothin' short o' lead as 'll cure you. I'm the last man in the world to spile sport, when it don't come in the way of more 'portant business. But I hold that you don't neither of you own your lives while Miss Kate is in diffikility—when we git her safe back to her pap, then it's a different thing. Then you kin blow holes through each other big enough fer a dog to jump through, an' I'll stan' by to see that nobody don't interfere. But on tel that time, you're goin' to keep the peace ef I hev to take an' lick you both—you hear me!"

"I don't doubt but what you'd try it, Bill," laughed Happy Jack. "And I, for my part, am ready to pass my word to keep the peace until Miss Markham is once more safe at the fort—provided Captain Stone is agreeable."

"You will give me satisfaction, then?"

"If you forget to ask it, sir, I pledge you my word to freshen your memory," quickly replied the scout.

"Good enough! You shall not have far to search."

"That's settled then," said Comstock, in a tone of relief. "Now then, s'pose we settle what we've to do next? Of course we've got to git the lady away from them white Injuns, but how? that's the question."

"There is but one way—to go and take her," briefly uttered Captain Stone; and though his words sounded like bravado, every one present knew that he meant just what he said. Whatever else he might lack, it assuredly was not courage.

"At the most, the party will not number more than twenty," said Happy Jack. "I only saw fourteen, but the woman who released me, spoke of others, whose return might be expect-

ed at any hour. I feel pretty sure that I can lead you to the spot without much delay. Once there, we can pick our cover and keep them from coming out, even if we cannot get in. If we could manage to get word to the fort—"

"What's to hender? not the red-skins, fer if they 'lowed to hang 'round these diggin's, they wouldn't a' give us back our skelps when they had us farly down," and Comstock gave a brief review of what had occurred since his party left Fort Western. "She did it—you hain't forgot the little angel you—"

"But how could she know—"

"Didn't, I reckon. 'Pend upon it, she brung some sort o' mighty big news—nothin' shorter'd a' kerried them off so quick; didn't even stop to tote away the imps which we'd rubbed out."

"If they have left—and it looks like it, from what you say—then our course is clear enough. One of us must carry the news to the fort, and guide a force strong enough to clean out that gang. The shortest way will be for them to ride straight to the valley, and follow it up. The rest of us can strike across and meet them there, or else leave a broad trail for them to follow. This is the best plan I can think of; perhaps these gentlemen can improve upon it."

"I am better at working than planning, but it seems to me that your plan is the only one that is left open to us," said Stone, with wonderful cordiality, for him.

"That is settled, then! I reckon we'd better squinch the fire an' ketch" what sleep we kin afore day. I'm tireder'n a dog!" yawned Comstock, knocking the ashes from his pipe, and stamping out the smoldering embers.

There was no dissent to this suggestion, and in five minutes more the entire party were sound asleep. Though the chances were that the outlaws were still quartering through the hills in search of their late prisoner, Comstock knew that any attempt to force a passage through the stiff screen of bushes would instantly awaken him, and feeling too fatigued to stand guard himself, he would not ask another to perform that duty.

With the first gleam of day he was afoot, and aroused his companion, while eating the last fragment of the food they had brought from the fort, it was agreed that Martin, a clever-witted and experienced scout, should carry the message to Fort Western, if the Indians had really abandoned the siege, while the remainder should push on for the valley, and there take up the trail left by the abductors of Kate Markham.

"Thirty men'll be plenty. Ride straight in to the valley, an' if you don't find us thar, take up the trail as we'll leave for you. Now skin out, an' see what a race-hoss you kin make of your legs!"

Without a word Martin departed, and then the other five set off for Crooked Valley. Their progress was slow, both on account of the natural difficulties and the necessity of keeping on a good look-out against falling into any ambuscade, since it was almost certain that the outlaws were still afoot, in addition to the Sioux braves who had been left upon the hill above the stone fort. If the former should recognize their recent captive, and be in ignorance of the fact that a messenger had been dispatched to the fort with the whole story, the chances were all in favor of their attempting to surprise the party and thus prevent the threatened miscarriage of their carefully laid plans.

Reasoning thus, the little party neglected no precautions, spreading out in such a manner that even if a trap was sprung, it could hardly include them all. Owing to this course, the valley was not reached until high noon. They regretted the delay, but, though nothing had been seen of the outlaws, it was deemed no more than prudent to maintain the same course of action throughout.

The little plateau was easily found, and the trail taken up, each man leaving behind him as distinct marks as possible, to guide the expected re-enforcements. For several miles the scouts found no difficulty in following the hoof-prints, but then, at a point where three distinct valleys took the place of the one they had been traversing, the case assumed a different aspect.

The soil here was literally covered with a thick layer of pebbles and flinty shale, over which a regiment of cavalry might have passed without leaving a trail that the keenest eye could follow after an hour of sunshine.

"We've got to split," said Comstock, in a tone of disgust. "It'll be the surest and quickest way. Look for hoss-droppin's. Ef they ain't any, keep on till the ground changes. The one as finds it, 'll give a call, and the rest'll cut 'crost to meet him. But mind an' keep an eye out for snakes."

Bowen and Happy Jack took one valley, Stone and Obermeyer the center one, leaving Comstock to explore the third alone. The latter did not waste time searching for tracks upon the flinty ground, but trotted along, only watching that there were no side defiles, until he reached more favorable soil, where he saw the broken trail, and immediately gave the signal.

Ten minutes later he was startled by the sound

of fire arms, followed by a wild scream of mortal agony, coming from the direction of his friends. Drawing a revolver, he sprung up the sloping ridge, and, seeing Happy Jack standing about half-way down the slope, he bounded recklessly toward him, just as Bowen and Obermeyer made their appearance with loud exclamations of horror.

At the feet of Happy Jack lay the bleeding form of Captain Stone, apparently dead!

"Good God! pard, what does this mean?" gasped Comstock.

As though the words were magical, Captain Stone raised himself upon one hand, pointing the other at Happy Jack, and cried in a husky, shaking voice:

"As God is my judge, that villain murdered me!"

With that terrible accusation, he fell back, stone dead!

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WOMAN'S WIT.

WHEN Martha Bascom—for that was her name, by virtue of her marriage with Thomas Bascom, otherwise Baby Tom—declared she was risking her life in setting Happy Jack free, she said no more than the truth. She well knew that if her agency was even suspected, she would have to suffer the penalty, and Baby Tom would probably be the one to administer it. Yet, had she known that discovery was certain, she would hardly have hesitated.

She was at the entrance of the cave when the party paused at the foot of the hill, and she had a fair view of the prisoners' faces. Her face turned ghastly pale when she noticed the young scout, and for an instant it seemed as though she would fall. As the men scaled the slope, she hastily retreated, nor did she come forward until Baby Tom called for her.

"Take this lady back thar—that take good keer o' her, too. She's wuth a chunk o' gold bigger'n a mule!"

In silence she led Kate Markham through the gloom, passing into a small, though not uncomfortable, chamberlike recess, before which hung a rude screen of skins. As the robes dropped behind them, she hurriedly demanded:

"That man—the prisoner; who is he—what is his name?"

"He is a scout, or guide; I believe people call him Happy Jack—" hesitated Kate, half-frightened by the woman's impatient vehemence.

"You must remain here. I will not be gone long. When I return, you can tell me your story, and we will see what can be done."

Martha Bascom left the cell-like chamber and noiselessly glided along through the darkness, evidently thoroughly acquainted with her surroundings, for, though the floor of the cavern was rough and uneven, not the faintest sound betrayed her passage, and undiscovered she passed just outside the narrow circle of light cast by the sputtering torch. Her position was such that she had a fair view of the scout's features, and a long, earnest scrutiny convinced her that her suspicions were well founded.

As the woman listened intently, almost breathlessly to the conversation that ensued, her resolve was taken. She would save this man—would risk her life, if need be, and thus, in part, atone for the past. She readily divined the trap which cunning Ben Watson had laid for the scout, and she knew, too, that she alone of all present could read the message as really written. Every word that the decoy uttered was treasured up for future use, and when her husband bade Simpson fetch her, she fled swiftly back to the chamber where Kate awaited her, and barely had time to caution the captive against speaking, when the outlaw summoned her.

The reader knows how well Mrs. Bascom played her part, that of a cold, passionless agent; but when she returned to her abiding-place, nature asserted itself and she broke down in a flood of hysterical tears.

Until now Kate had been repelled, almost terrified, by the excitable manner of the woman, but at the sight of such bitter tears she forgot all else save that one of her own sex was in trouble. Her tender ministrations and soothing words soon produced a favorable effect, and Mrs. Bascom gradually regained her composure.

"I am better now—it was very foolish for me to give way—there is so much to be done. Will you tell me all that has happened—why you have been brought here? I am not asking through idle curiosity."

Kate Markham complied, giving a brief outline of what had transpired since the White Sioux so daringly attempted to abduct her, not forgetting the threats uttered in her hearing by Baby Tom.

"And that creature is my husband—God help me!" cried Martha Bascom, bitterly; adding, as Kate involuntarily shrank away: "That's right! draw back lest I should contaminate you—tis no more than I deserve."

"Your look frightened me," said Kate, blushing hotly. "You cannot be wicked—your face is not that of a wicked woman—"

"My face! I have often wished that God had made me a monster—that I was blind—hideous,

an object of loathing! That is, of late years. Once I was very proud of my fair face and fine figure—God help me! The beauty was all outside! It led me into sin—it sent my poor mother to the grave before her time. I was so proud and haughty, then! Now—I am the wife of a common drunkard, a brute, an outlawed robber—it may even be worse!"

"You have been more sinned against than sinning—of that I feel assured," said Kate, gently. "But why tell me this, when it must be so bitter to recall?"

"I could not help it. You spoke so kindly—you are the first true woman whom I have met for years. I had to speak, or I should have gone crazy. Sometimes I fear that I am mad—I would have ended all, long ago, but for one hope. But there—I am wasting precious time. You are the daughter of Colonel Markham; tell me about him. Of course he knows this stranger—this Happy Jack. On what terms do they stand? Are they close friends?"

Kate's answer proved far from satisfactory. She had been but a few days at the fort, and during that time Happy Jack had been absent on duty. She had never met him until the day of the feast—had never even heard his name spoken.

"He is a handsome young man," slowly uttered Mrs. Bascom, her eyes riveted upon Kate's face. "It is a pity that he should be so ignorant and rough—"

"You do him injustice, madam! he is a perfect gentleman in—"

There was something in the older woman's eyes that caused Kate to hesitate, and brought the swift blood flaming hotly to her cheek.

"My dear young lady, I am going to say something that you may think is very impudent, but, believe me, it is my wish to serve, not annoy you. After all, I may be wrong—if so, there can be no harm done. You will not take offense where none is intended?"

"I do not think you would say anything willingly to hurt my feelings," replied Kate, though hesitatingly.

"I can see that you doubt—but time will cure all things. This young man is handsome, brave and is of a far higher station than his present calling would seem to indicate. He is such that any woman might be proud of his love. And yet—you must never allow him to become dear to you—in that way. You and he can never marry. You smile, but is there no danger? Ah, poor girl! that red flag is easily translated by eyes that have seen as much as mine. But there cannot be much danger where the acquaintance has been so short. You must be on guard. There is a bar between you two that cannot be passed. I can say no more now, for there is work before me. Listen," and, drawing nearer to Kate, Martha Bascom revealed the plan she had already formed for the release of Happy Jack.

"His life hangs upon a thread—if the truth of that letter should be discovered he would be murdered without a doubt. And yet—if I read his character aright—he will refuse to flee while you remain a captive. You must send him word to go—for your sake."

Kate gave the requested message, and then Mrs. Bascom stole silently away.

With face buried in her hands, Kate Markham thought long and earnestly over what she had heard. Who and what was this woman? What did she know of Happy Jack, and what could the bar of which she had spoken be? In vain she sought for a clew to the mystery. All was dark—all was confusion from which she failed to extract a single gleam of light.

After what seemed hours to the agitated maiden, Martha Bascom re-entered the chamber, breathing quickly. Kate looked up anxiously, but a swift gesture checked the query upon her lips.

"Lie down—not a word!" and the woman forced her toward the pallet of skins. "Pretend to sleep—for your life!"

As she spoke, Mrs. Bascom extinguished the light and dropped down beside the maiden. For several minutes all was silence—then came the wild alarm of the surprised sentinel, and in another minute the entire cavern was in an uproar.

"Do not speak a word—leave all to me," hurriedly whispered Martha, as rapid footsteps were heard drawing near.

Bearing a blazing torch, Baby Tom sprung into the cell, his face like that of an angry lion. He saw the two women lying side by side, though awake, and his worst fears were allayed as he recognized Kate.

"Some of the men fighting, I suppose?" calmly said Martha.

"You hain't bin out o' here?" snarled Baby Tom.

"Not since we lay down—why?" was the quiet reply.

"See 't you keep close, then, ontel I come back. Ef you stir a step outside, you'll git your brains blowed out—you hear?" and then, without waiting for a reply, he left the room.

"He has got safely outside—God grant that he may not be recaptured! Pray for his escape—pray, as though for your brother!" excitedly muttered Mrs. Bascom.

In silence, in fear and trembling, they awaited the result of the pursuit. Of the two it would be difficult to say which felt the deeper interest.

As the hours wore on, their hopes increased. Surely, unless Happy Jack had successfully eluded his pursuers, they would have returned ere this?

At last they heard the sound of some person entering the cave, and a short time after came the harsh voice of Baby Tom.

"You hain't heerd nothin'—they hain't tried no tricks!"

"They've bin whisperin' some, but I couldn't make out what 'twas about," replied Simpson.

"Thank God that we were prudent! That man has been spying upon us!" muttered Mrs. Bascom.

Baby Tom entered the chamber and lighted a torch, thrusting it into a crack in the wall, then turned toward the two women.

"Now, old gal, I want to know what all this means. What'd you set that man loose fer?"

"What do you mean?" coldly responded Martha.

"Happy Jack. I tied him myself, an' I know he couldn't 'a' got loose 'thout somebody helped him. Thar wasn't nobody fool enough to do it onless you did, an' I want to know what you did it for?"

"I have not seen the man since I read you his letter."

"Tain't likely you'd take a canle, to tell us all what you was up to," and Baby Tom showed his teeth. "Come here."

In silence Martha obeyed. The ruffian grasped her by the shoulder, holding her in such a way that the red torchlight fell fairly upon her face.

"You see this?" and he cocked a revolver, which he held before her face. "Now you want to tell me the hull thing from eend to eend, or I'll send you to never come back ag'in in jest ten seconds—you hear?"

"Fire if you dare, you coward! You have not made my life so pleasant that I need fear death. Fire! if I knew all and more than you ask, I would refuse to speak one word after your threats," dauntlessly cried the woman.

CHAPTER XIX.

RACING AGAINST TIME.

THE enigma that had so utterly baffled Bill Comstock and his comrades—why had the White Sioux drawn off his braves in the very moment when complete victory was crowning their desperate efforts?—had a very simple solution, after all.

When the chief sprung upon the ledge at the head of his braves, the first glance told him that he had been fighting for a myth—that Kate Markham was not, had not been upon the ledge. At that moment he would have been well content to abandon the struggle, for, despite the thousand and one stories of his fiendish barbarity, he was by no means the ruthless hater and enemy of his own race for which he received credit. He had sworn bitter and undying vengeance against one man—the man who, urged on by fiery jealousy, had wrecked the life of his successful rival; but no more. He had taken life, more than once, but he had risked his own as freely. He had found a home among the red-men, when his own color had hunted him down like a mad-dog. His natural powers had gradually won for him respect and veneration. His word was law. But instead of being indiscriminately revengeful the White Sioux had used his influence freely in the cause of mercy—had saved scores of lives that would otherwise have been sacrificed. He warred only against the United States troops, watching and waiting for the hour that was to bring him the one thing that could make part atonement for the past. He felt that this hour had come when Colonel Westley Markham assumed command of Fort Western. He bided his time with the patience his red-skin brethren had taught him, and on the day of the feast he made his stroke, with the result already recorded. Since the father had escaped him, his whole heart was bent on securing the daughter, and his firm belief that she was among the occupants of the stone fort will account for the deadly persistence of his assaults.

The dauntless courage displayed by the whites had fairly won his respect, and it was with real satisfaction that he seized the opportunity of sparing their lives without arousing the suspicions of his braves.

His ear caught the first sound of the young woman's voice as she galloped up the valley, and though he scarcely comprehended the full purport of her words he gave the signal to retreat.

"Back—back to the horses!" he cried, as he ran swiftly toward the rider, speaking in the Sioux dialect. "Now, why are you here? what word do you bring?" he added, hurriedly, when the party came to a halt.

"Black tidings, my father! The Apsaroka dogs have blackened their faces and crawled from their holes when they heard that the great chief had ridden far away. The cunning Little Bull stole among their lodges and listened to their councils. He heard them say that when

the White Sioux returned it should be to find his people dead and their scalps stolen. Little Bull brought the news, and the wife of the White Chief bade me ride like the wind to bid him return."

"Were there no men among the Sioux, that a squaw must act as a runner?" and the brow of the chief grew dark.

"A squaw could ride as swift, though she might not fight so well. There were few braves to fight so many wolves, and the Yellow Pine said no warrior must turn his back to the foe. She bade me find him, or die. I have obeyed."

"And God bless you for it, my Eunora!" muttered the White Sioux, his lips close to her ear. "I am very proud of my children, though my words may sound cold when spoken where others can hear." Then adding, aloud, addressing the warriors, who were greatly excited by the startling tidings: "Go prepare your horses for a long and hard ride. The Crow dogs are threatening our women and children. We will teach them a black and bitter lesson. Go—and quickly!"

"I do not see Kenekuk—where is my brother?"

"Come with me—no, child," he added, quickly, as the fair face of Eunora grew pale; "there is nothing to fear. The lad is wounded, but not badly. Yellow Pine will have good cause to be proud of her young chief, for he fought well today—he struck the enemy even before my arm could reach them."

They found Kenekuk eagerly awaiting their coming. From his resting-place he had recognized his sister as she dashed by, and called to her, but his voice was too weak for the words to reach her ear. His wounds in face and body were such that Eunora dared not embrace him, but their hands met in a loving clasp that was a partial exposition of their deep and pure affection.

In a few words the White Sioux made known the important tidings brought by the young girl, and the knowledge of the peril which threatened his mother seemed to suddenly restore the young brave's strength.

"We must go at once! why do we wait?" he uttered, seemingly not feeling the pain the effort to speak caused his lacerated cheek. "Our mother is in danger—and I am lying here—"

With a sudden motion he arose, laughing faintly as a little cry of alarm parted Eunora's red lips. The chief said nothing, though he drew nearer as though expecting the wounded youth would fall.

"You cannot—it will kill you—"

"If I die it will be in the saddle, my face toward our mother," was the resolute reply. "I will go, though I go alone and upon foot!"

"Good! you are her son, to the heart. If your body is strong as your spirit, you shall tell your mother we are coming with blood in our eyes!" exclaimed the White Sioux, just as the mounted warriors came across to where the trio were standing.

A murmur of approval ran through the dusky crowd. The eye of their chief sparkled; he had intended his words to be heard, and was well satisfied with the result.

Among the led horses were three that had escaped from the foot of the hill, when the falling rock had burst their tethers, and, breaking away from the warrior who led it, the ungainly brute with which Comstock had experienced so much trouble ran up to the White Sioux, with a glad whimper. At the chief's command, his own saddle was placed upon the animal, and then Kenekuk painfully climbed into it, doggedly refusing any assistance. Eunora and her father quickly followed his example, and then the party rode rapidly out of the valley—less than one-half the number that had entered it that morning.

Bill Comstock would have opened his eyes could he have witnessed the manner in which his troublesome capture bore its present rider. At a motion from the White Sioux, the big-boned, loose-jointed animal became a marvel of swift, yet smooth and gentle motion, carrying the wounded brave as softly and carefully as a loving mother her babe.

The trio rode at the head of the cavalcade, heading straight for Fort Western. And while they progressed, Eunora told her story with greater detail.

A cunning scout of the Sioux had discovered the plans of the Crows, who, it seems, had learned that the White Sioux with the larger portion of his braves, had departed upon some expedition which, from their elaborate preparations, was evidently to be a prolonged absence. Naturally enough they resolved to seize upon this golden opportunity of striking a heavy blow at an audacious enemy, and to make sure of success, they were to call in several bands which were then absent hunting. Afraid to weaken their small force by sending away even one man, Yellow Pine, the chief's wife, bade her daughter carry the news. Right nobly the girl obeyed, her horse dropping dead when still several miles from Fort Western. Hasting on, she dispatched the Sioux, whom she found in the valley, to the aid of the village, then, freshly mounted, sped on along the

White Chief's trail, reaching him, as heretofore stated.

The sun sunk from view, and the curtain of night fell long before the party came in sight of the fort. Many were the anxious glances cast upon Kenekuk, by father and sister, for, though he never betrayed by a sound the torture he was undergoing, a loving eye could see that his strength was fast failing. And then, all at once, the stout-hearted lad gave way, and would have fallen but for his parent's hand. Without slackening his speed, the chief sprung behind Kenekuk, and holding him fast, urged his horse on—on like the wind, reaching the valley far ahead of his followers. Dismounting, he bore the youth up a steep ascent, entering a cunningly concealed cave, small, but airy and comfortable, then descended and awaited the coming of the rest.

"You will ride on," he said, addressing a middle-aged warrior. "Stop for nothing. I will soon follow you."

As the party passed along, he selected two of the braves. These, with Eunora, he led up to the little cave, where he briefly gave them their instructions. Upon no account were they to venture from their covert except at night, and then every trace of their passage was to be carefully removed. If discovered, they were to fight to the bitter end—if need be, to kill themselves rather than be captured. To Eunora he gave directions how to dress the wounds of her brother. Then, with a silent hand-pressure, he descended to his horse, mounted and rode swiftly away.

On through the night, like the wild huntsman of old—on, without pause, over hill and rock, through valley and prairie, overtaking the Sioux, and shouting for them to press on at speed while their animals could keep their feet, still on the White Sioux dashed, nor paused for rest until the sun peered over the mountains.

One hour he allowed his horse for rest and food, then once more sped on, riding against time. Twice during that day he was forced to draw rein, not for himself, but not even his faithful horse could accomplish the impossible.

As the night fell once more, he overtook the warriors whom Eunora had sent ahead. He rode with them for a few miles, for the village was now close at hand. Then—faint and indistinct, but unmistakable came the sound of fire-arms! The Crows had made their swoop!

Using his knife for a spur, the White Sioux thundered on, his heart sick with dread. He uttered his wild war-cry as he entered the village, and the exultant yells of the Crows were turned to yells of dismay as that dreaded foeman plunged into their midst. With revived courage the Sioux braves rallied—forced back the enemy, slowly but surely. Then came the reinforcement. The tide was turned. From victors, the Crows became vanquished. Blood flowed like water. Stout braves fell like the leaves in a storm, and the retreat of the Crows was marked by a trail of stiffening corpses.

Pale, haggard, his right arm bloodstained to the elbow, the White Sioux returned to his village. A faint voice saluted his ear. A cry of sickening dread parted his lips as he sprung toward his lodge. Four forms lay close together. Three were Crows—the fourth, his wife, Yellow Pine!

As he raised her head to his bosom, the red light of the blazing lodges revealed a smile upon her lips, and she murmured:

"Tell my son—I leave him three scalps—for his lodge!"

She raised her head, feebly pressed her lips to his, then dropped heavily. Yellow Pine was dead.

CHAPTER XX.

AN EXCHANGE OF QUARTERS.

With a cry of horror Kate Markham sprung forward and turned the threatening weapon aside from the temple of the outlaw's wife. This action so astonished Baby Tom that he fairly relinquished his grasp upon the weapon, an advantage that the maiden, rendered desperate, was not slow to seize upon.

"Release that woman—move not to injure her in any way, or I will shoot you like a dog!"

With a courage and decision born of the emergency, Kate Markham confronted the giant and leveled his own revolver at his head. Her voice rung out clear and commanding, there was a sparkle in her eyes that boded danger, and the hand that leveled the pistol was steady and true.

Slowly the fingers of the giant relaxed their pressure, and his arm dropped to his side. His big blue eyes were fixed upon Kate—but their only expression was that of surprise. Taken throughout he was the very picture of utter amazement. He seemed utterly unable to comprehend what had occurred. Then, slowly, the full force of the situation appeared to dawn upon his sluggish wits. The ludicrous look of bewilderment disappeared before a gradually broadened grin of amused admiration as he slowly ejaculated:

"Waal—I—ber-durned!"

"Promise not to injure her, or I fire!" repeated Kate, steadying the heavy pistol with both hands.

"I never raily lowed to hurt her," coolly replied Baby Tom. "I jest wanted to skeer the truth out o' the critter; but ef I wanted to kill her the wust kind, one word from you'd be more'n enough to save the powder," and a hot light of admiration filled the outlaw's eyes.

"Especially when backed by a loaded pistol," retorted Kate, with a rather hysterical laugh.

"The weepin ain't nigh so dangerous as your two eyes"—but the undoubtedly sincere, if rudely-expressed speech was cut short by a low, satirical laugh from Martha Bascom that caused the hot blood to darken the giant's brow, as he turned quickly upon her. "You want to go slow, old woman! I let ye off this once—an' you kin thank this young leddy for't. But go slow! ef ever I find you've had anythin' to do with lettin' that feller slip us, you'll never get another chance of playin' your devilmint mind that!"

"The day is past, Tom Bascom, for me to care for either your hate or your love. I almost wish you had blown out my brains. I would do it myself, only I know that would please you too well!"

"That's enough. Now you two want to git ready fer a long an' hard ride. We've got to skin out o' yer, an' that mighty lively, too! You hain't got much time, an' you'd better make the best of it."

Baby Tom, without attempting to recover his revolver from Kate's hands, turned and left the chamber. He was in a far better humor than when he had entered it. The unlooked-for display of spirit on the part of his captive, seemed to afford him no little gratification.

With a caution to Simpson against letting the women pass him, the giant made his way to the cave entrance, where still lay the corpse of the guard whom Happy Jack had slain in making his escape. Day was just beginning to dawn, as the creamy tinge beyond the hills bore evidence.

Baby Tom gave vent to a grunt—whether of satisfaction or of disgust, would be hard to tell—as he saw a small group of men approaching. He recognized them at once, and his cat-like vision told him that Happy Jack had not been recaptured by them at least.

"The varmint got clean off!" said Ben Watson, in a tone of intense disgust. "A blood-houn' couldn't foller a foot trail through them rocks. Some o' the boys kep' on, but 'tain't no use. They'll never ketch a man like him!"

"An' that knocks your big money higher'n a kite!" sourly uttered one of his fellows. "An' we've got the gal on our hands, to boot. Ef ever you ketch me in a-nother sich fool job—"

"You kin skin out jist as soon as you like, Barker," interrupted Baby Tom. "Thar'll be so much the more fer the rest. S'pose he did git away, what does that hurt? We've got the gal, hain't we? An' we'll hang on to her ontel the old man shells out the chink, or he'll never set his two eyes on her this side o' monkey-heaven!"

"That's the talk—I knowed you'd got the sand, cap'n! We kin rake the pile ef we jest play our hand fer all its wuth. We must hunt out another hole, take the gal thar an' keep her close, while we send on our tarms to the fort!"

"Who'll kerry 'em?" interrupted Barker. "He'd better 'sure his life, fust."

"I will—ef you all agree to give me Dick's sheer—that cuss hit harder'n a mule kid kick! I'll run the resk, ef you say so. Ef I don't come back inside a week, you kin know that I ain't in travelin' order, an' then you must look out fer snags. But I'll put it to 'em so strong the old man won't dar' try any tricks."

"What wedo's got to be did soon. They's no tellin' but that cuss may run 'cross somebody out huntin' fer the gal, an' we want to be somewhar else when they call, I reckon. Ef the rest o' the boys was here—but they kin take that chancies. I reckon we'd better make fer Black Hollow. Kiver's good, an' we kin git in by the crick 'thout leavin' any sign."

"Better play the old game. Start off together, then split up an'shoe the critters. Wait thar fer me—"

"Ef we have to wait too long, Ben, I reckon I'll come to see what's the matter. Five thousand dollars is a pritty big load fer one man to tote," quietly added the giant.

"It'll be in greenbacks, an' not so hefty," replied Watson, evidently not caring to notice the implied threat.

After some further discussion this plan was adopted, and the outlaws at once set about their preparations.

While the men were busied with the horses, several others, including Baby Tom, hastily packed up the few articles of use or value which the cave contained, and which could be transported on horseback. Then the giant summoned Martha Bascom and Kate, finding them in readiness for the road. They followed him in silence to the outer air, where the animals were awaiting them. Kate could not suppress a little cry of strangely-mingled emotions, as she recognized the gallant Simoom among the others; but Baby Tom gave her little time for reflection. His brawny hands clasped her waist and raised

her to the saddle. As he did this a peculiar short laugh parted his lips. Kate glanced at him sharply, but he turned quickly away and mounted Simoom.

The cavalcade trotted briskly along the valley. The first red rays of the sun were tinging the highest rock-points. The air was fresh and balmy. Under almost any other circumstances, Kate Markham would have enjoyed the ride; but it was almost positive torture, now. The terrible uncertainty whether her father was living or dead—the danger that threatened herself; these anxieties were almost unbearable.

For an hour or more the party rode on, then, at a point where the country was more level, the outlaws separated into pairs, save the three men who each had one pack-horse, and who set off alone. After riding a few hundred yards beside Kate, Baby Tom dismounted, and with cloths and skins brought from the cavern, carefully wrapped the feet of both horses. In that minute came a strong temptation upon the maiden, and she cast a quick glance around her. But there were three different parties still within sight, all engaged on the same work as the giant, and she knew that the time had not yet come.

Baby Tom remounted Simoom and once more pursued his way through the apparently trackless waste of rocks. Yet he never hesitated, never once seemed at a loss which course to pursue. For more than an hour he never uttered a word, scarcely glancing toward his prisoner, seemingly satisfied that while he held the halter of her horse, she could not escape him.

Kate's left hand rested upon something hard and heavy, which was concealed within the folds of her riding-skirt. It was the revolver she had taken from the giant a few hours previously. She felt that one shot from it would set her free—she had resolved to make the attempt; yet Baby Tom seemed so unsuspicious that the deed looked almost like murder.

"D'y know what I've bin thinkin' about?" suddenly uttered the outlaw, turning his head and looking squarely into her eyes. "I've bin thinkin' what I'd better do: keep right on an' meet the boys, as I agreed, or take you an' strike out on my own hook. Which d'you say, s'posin' I was to give you the ch'ice?"

"Take me back to the fort!—to my father! act the part of a man and a Christian—" impulsively began Kate.

"An' git a chunk o' lead fer my pains," dryly interrupted Baby Tom. "That would be smart!"

"You shall not be harmed—I pledge you my word. If you want money, you shall have it."

"I 'spect to. I was thinkin' ef it wouldn't be the best plan to marry you out-an'-out—"

A sharp cry of anger broke from Kate's lips, and her face flushed at the gross insult. It was the one thing required, and she slipped her hand down until it firmly grasped the pistol-stock. Then, forcing herself to speak calmly, she looked the giant full in the face, and said:

"You ask my advice, then?"

"Sartin," came the unhesitating response.

"Here it is!"

As she uttered the words, Kate raised the revolver, cocking it with the same motion, and fired, the muzzle almost touching the outlaw's face.

But the next moment she felt the weapon twisted from her grasp, and heard Baby Tom utter a taunting laugh! Quick as her action had been, he had been no less alert, and ducking his head, the bullet had whistled harmlessly by.

"Now we'll ride on," he said, laughing. "That was all I wanted. Ye see, I felt the weepin' when I lifted you on the hoss, an' I knowed you'd be on the look-out fer some sech chainece, but I didn't like to s'arch ye afore the boys. So I 'cluded to git your mad up—an' I did, too!"

Kate dared not trust herself to reply. The hot tears began to well up into her eyes, but she averted her head to keep them from his sight. And as she did so, she saw something that caused her heart to beat with suffocating force.

Far away, ahead and to the left, were several horsemen. They were upon high ground, and as the mornin' sun shone upon their forms, she could see that they were white men. She could see, too, that one of the number rode a large white horse—and the wild hope flashed through her mind that this was her father, upon his favorite charger, searching for her!

And she prayed in her heart of hearts that her captor would not observe them in time to avoid the meeting.

CHAPTER XXI.

HAPPY JACK IN TROUBLE.

CHARGING Happy Jack with his murder, Captain Lawrence Stone sunk back, dead!

When he heard those words, so painfully uttered, when he saw the dying man's accusing finger leveled at himself, the scout seemed dazed, until the full force of the situation was revealed to him by the involuntary shrinking away of the two soldiers. Not until then did he

seem to realize the whole truth—that he was branded an assassin. An angry cry parted his lips, and he started forward as though to force a retraction from the lips that were already locked in death, but Bill Comstock stepped before him, saying, gently:

"The man is gone, pard. I reckon he was crazy when he said that. I know you wouldn't 'a' tetch him unless it mought be in a fa'r, man-to-man fought."

"I had pledged my word to keep the peace with him. So far from doing him harm, I tried to save his life. Look over yonder—by the black rock. You will find my game there," said Happy Jack, coldly, though his eyes were still filled with a lurid fire.

Comstock uttered a joyful yell as he sprung to the rock indicated, for there, in the shape of a rough-clad man, now groveling in a pool of his own blood, he found what he believed would prove the true solution of this terrible enigma. The two soldiers and Happy Jack slowly advanced, and as the wounded wretch looked up, the scout uttered a little cry. He recognized Ben Watson, the decoy!

"Keep a stiff lip, pard—stick it out—I won't peach!"

The words dropped from the outlaw's lips in snatches, and a look of intense cunning stole over his face, while his eyes rolled wildly from side to side. Comstock started. Bowen and Obermeyer interchanged swift glances—but Happy Jack caught them, and his face flushed hotly.

"I don't know what you mean," he uttered, stooping and endeavoring to fix Watson's eye. "That I shot you, I don't deny; but it was only after you shot Captain Stone."

Sergeant Bowen now interposed. His tone was grave, and there were traces of painful regret upon his face.

"Gentlemen," he said, though his eyes were fixed upon those of the young scout, "this is a very painful affair—and one that must be cleared up, at whatever cost. I think I can manage it. But first—sir," and he extended his hand to Happy Jack, "I believe you are as innocent as I of this crime."

"You do me no more than justice, friend," quietly replied the scout. "As for your plan—all we want is the truth."

"I know it, sir. Then lend me the pistol you have in your hand. Thanks. See—I mark it with two crosses. Comstock, will you mark *that* one?" and the sergeant nodded toward the revolver lying beside the wounded outlaw. In silence the scout pointed to the initials "B. W." rudely cut upon the walnut stock.

"Good! you see—this pistol—belonging to Happy Jack—is Colt's Army pistol, while that one is Nary size. One of these two weapons must have killed Captain Stone. Unless the bullet has passed entirely through his body, it will not be hard to determine which weapon it came from."

A quick smile flashed across the scout's face, but Comstock muttered something that sounded very much like a curse. Sergeant Bowen turned toward the corpse, and Comstock spoke to Jack in a quick, guarded tone:

"They's only two ag'in us—I kin knock 'em both over—everybody 'll lay it on them Injuns—"

"Are you crazy—or drunk?" and Happy Jack stared at his comrade in genuine astonishment.

"Look here," added Comstock, holding up the pistol which had fallen from Ben Watson's hand. "You see *that*?"

Happy Jack turned white as a snow-drift, as he divined the scout's meaning, and for once in his life he realized the full meaning of the word fear. His hand shook as he seized the weapon and closely inspected it. There was no mistake. *The weapon had not been discharged!* and around the tube upon which the hammer rested were small particles of dust!

"Quick—say the word—it's you or them!" hissed Bill Comstock, his eyes on fire, his muscles quivering.

"Never!" firmly responded Happy Jack, tossing his head proudly back. "I am innocent, before God! I will not—"

"Then 'knowledge be threatened you—drew fu'st; you hed to shoot him to save your life—"

"I did not—he never assailed me, nor I him."

"Sergeant's found the bullet—wants you to come an' witness," said Obermeyer's hoarse voice, and as the two scouts turned toward him they caught a suspicious glance that brought the hot blood to Happy Jack's cheeks.

"Hark!" exclaimed Comstock, bending his ear, "somebody's comin'—I hear hoofs! Take to kiver—"

"They are whites—I hear the jingle of sabers," interrupted Happy Jack, not moving. "They must be friends; yet Martin could not have gone and returned so quickly."

Obermeyer ran rapidly up the rocky hill and peered over into the valley beyond. Then he rose erect, and, with a loud cheer, swung his hat above his head, then disappeared.

Sergeant Bowen arose from beside the corpse and said, with an air of relief:

"They must be friends. We will wait. The more witnesses we have the better. The bullet

is there—lodged just under the skin. A few minutes will show."

Comstock sat down, moodily picking at the earth. There was a brief period of silence, then, with Colonel Markham at their head, a squad of cavalry trotted up to the spot. From the troubled look upon the commander's face, it was evident that Obermeyer had spoken of the tragedy. Upon the faces of the soldiers rested curiosity, but there were no traces of respect in the glances cast upon the dead man. His conduct in life had not been such as wins either love or respect from his inferiors in rank.

"Your report, sergeant," said Markham, dismounting. "Obermeyer tells me that Captain Stone was murdered."

Saluting Sergeant Bowen briefly detailed the facts so far as known.

"Give me the weapons. You say they are marked?"

The pistols were handed him, and closely examined. A quick glance toward the accused told that he had made the same discovery as Bill Comstock, but without a word he turned to where the corpse lay. One hand still clutched the butt of a pistol. Markham gently unclasped the stiffening fingers and held the weapon up where all could see. It was richly ornamented, and bore the peculiar monogram of the dead man upon a plate set into the stock. A single chamber was discharged. The weapon was one of those commonly called "Colt's Navy."

"One word, Colonel Markham," said Happy Jack, coldly. "I have been accused—wrongfully, as God is my judge!—accused of murdering that man. Before you investigate further I wish to make a statement. Sergeant Bowen and myself were searching for a trail in the valley beyond. We came upon soft ground, and found that our game had not passed in that direction, and cut across that ridge to rejoin our comrades. Captain Stone and Walt Obermeyer were searching for the same trail in this valley—Comstock in the one just beyond. Sergeant Bowen fell behind—he had gotten some gravel in his boot, I believe. I passed on ahead. Just as I passed around yonder large rock—the one with the three cedars upon it—I saw Captain Stone arise from his knees and step forward, calling sharply to some person, at the same time drawing his revolver. Then I caught sight of a man—he lies yonder, wounded; I saw him in the act of firing at the captain, and, covering him, I fired. Both he and the captain fell. I ran forward, thinking there were more enemies near; but it seems there were not. Then Obermeyer came; and shortly after Sergeant Bowen and Comstock."

"How many shots were there fired?" asked Markham.

"I heard only two—my own and that of the deceased. And yet—there must have been another, since he was shot."

"You were standing by that boulder when you fired?"

"Yes. Captain Stone was standing just where he fell; the stranger was beside yonder rock."

"You are positive that when you fired, the deceased and the wounded man were facing each other?"

"I can take my oath to it, if necessary," was the prompt reply.

There was a sudden change in the colonel's face as Happy Jack made this answer; his brow grew dark and his thin lips were firmly compressed as he advanced.

"I must request you to deliver me your arms—"

The scout started back with a low cry. Comstock strode to his side, an ominous fire in his black eyes; but this movement served to bring Happy Jack to his senses, and gently pushing Bill aside, he resigned pistol and knife.

"Thanks. I hope soon to return them with congratulations. A brief examination will serve to prove who killed the deceased. Until then—sergeant, this gentleman is under your charge."

"Make a break for't, pard—I'll kiver ye!" eagerly muttered Comstock. "Dodge 'mong the rocks—"

"You, too, think me guilty, Bill?" and the accused smiled sadly. "I thought you knew me better—"

"The man as dar' say you did it, or even think o' sech a thing, I'll chaw up like smoke!" grunted Bill, with an ugly glance at Bowen.

"If you could manage to knock me down, sir," dropped slowly from the soldier's lips, as he edged close to Jack. "Strike hard and sure—don't be afraid of hurting me—snatch my revolver and run for it. It is your only chance—a moment's delay will be too late."

"Are you both crazy—or am I?" impatiently uttered the scout. "Or are you both in league to make me appear guilty, whether or no?"

"Will you swear that you are innocent—that you did not—I mean, could it not have been that the bullet glanced, or something—"

"His blood is not upon my head, by accident nor design. I swear it by my mother's grave!" quietly, but earnestly responded Happy Jack.

"I believe you! only—God grant that the murderer did not use a pistol of the same caliber as yours, for if he did—!"

At that moment the little group surrounding the corpse reported. At a signal from the colonel, four soldiers dismounted and advanced to his side. Signing for them to follow, he strode toward the accused.

"You still persist in your statement as to the relative positions of yourself and the deceased?" he asked.

Happy Jack bowed in silence.

"Then I arrest you for willful murder! The fatal shot came from that boulder—it struck the deceased beneath, and to the rear of his right shoulder, passing through his body and lodging beneath the skin upon his left breast. The bullet came from the same size pistol as yours. Do your duty, men!" coldly exclaimed Colonel Markham.

CHAPTER XXII.

GROPING IN THE DARK.

For one moment Happy Jack stood motionless, a sort of dazed incredulity written upon every feature. He seemed to be listening to words intended for somebody else. But as, in obedience to the colonel's orders, the four soldiers advanced to arrest him, his magnificent form suddenly straightened, his head was flung proudly back, his face flushed hotly, and a dangerous light filled his eyes—as though, unarmed, he would defy their power to arrest him for a crime of which he was innocent. But this lasted only for an instant. Then the scout bowed his head, his hands unclenched, he was ready for the inevitable.

Bill Comstock had missed nothing of all this. For one moment he believed that his friend meant to resist arrest, and his brown fingers closed quickly around the stock of his revolver, resolved to fall or stand beside his "pard." Then he saw how Jack had abandoned the vain hope of resistance—and his resolve was promptly taken. He sprung swiftly before Happy Jack, and drawing his revolvers, dropped them upon the ground at Colonel Markham's feet.

"You fellers is on the wrong trail," he began, speaking slowly and with a peculiar doggedness that was impressive in itself. "He never killed that man—he couldn't do it—tain't in him. If you want to know who did it, I'm the man—I sw'ar by the Eternel that *I shot Cap'n Stone!*"

A pair of strong hands were placed upon his shoulders, and turning his head, he met the gaze of Happy Jack—a look that seemed to reach his very heart, a look full of strong affection, yet laughing and quizzical.

"You mean well, old man, but it won't work. The bullet will not fit your pistol, and it will fit mine. I thank you all the same, but the best thing you can do for me is to wait—and let matters take their course. I ask it, for the sake of old times, pard," and he gently pushed Bill to one side, adding: "I am your prisoner, colonel; only—there is one person here who can clear me, if he will. I mean the man lying yonder," and he pointed toward Ben Watson, beside whom knelt a little fat man, the surgeon of the fort, and who at that moment hastily arose.

"A paper—directed to you, sir," he said, in answer to Colonel Markham's glance. "He had it."

With a changing countenance Colonel Markham read the message—the same which Happy Jack had written while the prisoner of Baby Tom. Strange as it may sound, he had almost forgotten the unexplained absence of his daughter, in the discovery of the murdered man and the hasty investigation which followed. Now he turned to Happy Jack, and asked:

"You wrote this? What does it all mean?"

The young scout gave a hasty explanation, his words creating no little excitement among his auditors. Brief as had been her residence at Fort Western, her grace, her beauty and spirits, but above all, her kind heart and ready hand had made her the idol of the boys in blue. But of them all, no one listened more intently than Ben Watson, and as he learned how utterly he and his comrades had been duped by the scout, he mentally vowed a bitter vengeance against the man, even though in carrying it out, he should find it necessary to sacrifice his own life. And unwilling to lose one moment's time, he gave vent to a hollow groan, contorting his face as though in mortal agony.

"I'm a-dyin', an' none o' you won't help me!" he gasped, as he saw that he had attracted attention. "Do somethin' to stop this awful fire inside o' me!—pears like I'm in hell a-ready!"

With a warning glance at the colonel, Dr. Hurlbut nodded toward the wounded wretch, his face preternaturally grave.

"I have done all I can for you, without instruments. There may be a hope for your life—if your mind is at rest. There is some secret troubling you. If you confess all it may be better," he said, soberly.

"I cain't—not while he's lookin' at me," gasped the decoy, casting a swift glance toward Happy Jack. "Make him go 'way—when his awful eyes is on me, I cain't do or say nothin' but what he is willin' I should. Take him away, an' I'll—tell all I know."

The effort seemed to exhaust him. His eyes closed, his breath came faint and fitfully. The worthy doctor looked puzzled, as well he might,

for Watson's wound, though severe, was by no means mortal. Yet, deeming it advisable to learn the truth, by all means, he withdrew the colonel to one side and made him understand his plan. Markham nodded, and then motioned for the men to fall back, asking the two scouts to accompany him for a moment. Drawing them beyond ear-shot, he improved the opportunity in learning what had occurred since the interrupted rabbit-chase.

Meanwhile, Ben Watson was pouring forth his confession to the startled and scandalized surgeon. The decoy was nothing if not dramatic. With a better education he would have made a superb sensational novelist—and better than most, his stories, though impromptu, in this case, hung well together—there were no ragged ends, no useless threads—just enough and nothing cut to waste.

He stated that himself and Happy Jack were old friends, and had been engaged in more than one pretty piece of work in the years gone by, though for some time they had been working different leads. They had met that night in the valley, by accident, but while Miss Markham was sleeping, Happy Jack had revealed a bold plan by which a large sum of money might be made, without much risk. The lady was to be held for ransom. The preliminaries were carried out faithfully, the scout being treated as a prisoner while before Miss Markham. But there was a plot within a plot. The two—himself and Happy Jack—had arranged to secure the whole sum demanded as ransom for themselves. Watson was to carry the letter to the fort, where it was expected that the colonel would promptly act upon the information therein contained. Meantime, the scout was to steal Miss Markham away from the others, and place her in a secure hiding-place. Of course the other men would take the alarm and flee for safety, the cave would be found empty, and in time the father would be forced to pay the money to Watson, as demanded. He was to make tracks at once, only setting up a signal which his partner would understand. Then Happy Jack was to carry Miss Markham away to the rendezvous, where, unless she would agree to become his wife, she was to be used to extort still further sums of money.

"I see him airy this mornin', an' he told me the gal war all safe, but wouldn't say whar he'd hid her. He said I must foller an' watch the fellers he was with, 'cause thar was a man—yender he lays, boss!—a man thar as could an' would spile the play of he warn't wiped out. I tried to beg off, but—I cain't explain how, but when he looks at me, I'm jist like a machine—I hain't got the feelin's of a man a-tall. I've got to do jist what he says. It's some devil's medicine, mebbe."

"Magnetism," ventured the surgeon, wiping his flushed brow.

"Mebbe—I don't know. Anyhow, I said I'd do it. I tried, but my cap bu'sted, an' the feller shot me! then he kem out, an' shot him from over yender. Thar! that's the truth an' nothin' but the truth, so help me!" and the lying wretch sealed his fiendish fabrication with a solemn oath.

Dr. Hurlbut, never very acute, was thoroughly and utterly deceived. Not that he believed Watson was dying, but that he really thought so, and the confession, though so horrible, was so adroitly told that it sounded far more like truth than truth itself.

Drawing Colonel Markham aside, he hurriedly detailed what Watson had confessed, deepening the impression of its truth, though possibly unconsciously, by his method of speaking about it. From that moment Colonel Markham doubted no longer. All feeling of pity, of regret, vanished before a stern resolve to punish to the utmost limit of his power, the wretch who had so basely plotted against the peace and happiness of his idolized child. He almost cursed himself for the leniency he had thus far shown him.

In a hoarse voice he ordered the soldiers to make ready—to cover the prisoner with their carbines. He was obeyed in silence, save an angry oath from the lips of Bill Comstock, who sprung before his friend as though the threatened volley should first pass through his breast.

"Sergeant Bowen," added the officer, "advance and bind the prisoner. If he attempts to resist, or if any man interferes, stand aside and leave the rest to me!"

"Take care—we kin jist lick the hull outfit!" hissed Comstock, still standing before Happy Jack, but then those hands put him aside as they had once before, and the young scout uttered, calmly:

"You can serve me better by waiting, pard. You know that some one killed him—seek him out. If too late to save, at least revenge me on him."

Comstock said not a word. There was a strange lump in his throat that would not let him. He stood aside and saw Jack extend his hands for the thongs. Then he squatted down upon the ground, hiding his face in both hands. This was a terribly strange and new experience to him—never before had he felt so helpless—so utterly unmanned.

Not so with the prisoner. He seemed the

calmest person within the little valley, and his voice sounded clear and self-contained as he addressed Colonel Markham:

"May I ask why you have so suddenly—"

"Ask nothing—but tell me, where have you hidden my daughter? Tell me, I say—!"

"If she is not at the cave, I do not know—"

"A lie you have hidden her away—your partner in the foul plot has confessed everything. Tell me what I have asked, or by the living Eternal! I will tear you limb from limb!" raged the officer, fairly frantic.

"Sir, you lie when you call me a liar. Until you have apologized for that lie, I will not speak another word," uttered Happy Jack, in a low, stern voice.

Dr. Hurlbut now interposed, whispering a few words in the colonel's ear. With a visible effort, Markham choked down his rage, though it was several moments ere he could speak.

He called forth the names of six men, and as the soldiers advanced, he continued:

"You will remain here, and guard the prisoner. If he attempts to escape, or if any of his confederates appear, your first duty will be to blow his brains out. Otherwise, await my return. Sound boot and saddle, there! You, Comstock, will guide us to this cave—"

"I'll see you d—d fust—an' then I won't!" bluntly interrupted Bill. "Not one lick o' work do you git out o' me while you keep my pard, thar, tied up—"

"Do you wish me to place you under arrest, sir?"

"You kin order—but thar'll be twelve men go under fust—an' you'll be the fust to lead the way," and as he spoke, Comstock drew and cocked his revolvers. "Treat him like a white man, an' I'll do what ye like. Take his parole, ontie his han's, an' we'll both try to make this 'ere muddle out. Ef not—then you don't git nothin' out o' this chicken softer nor lead pills—you hear me!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LOST TRAIL.

THE scene was a peculiar one—a single man apparently defying three-score. Squatting upon the low boulder, with a cocked and half-levled revolver in each hand, his dark, Indian-like face bearing a hard, dogged expression, his small, black eyes alone betraying any excitement, Bill Comstock awaited the answer to his bold defiance.

Colonel Markham, though very angry, was conscious of a feeling of admiration for the scout's blind, unreasoning devotion to his friend, and hesitated to utter the word that could only precipitate the bloodshed which he wished to avoid, if possible. And yet, he did not see how he could overlook the pointed challenge of the scout, without positive injury to his influence and discipline.

At this moment Happy Jack, his arms bound, passed over to where Comstock crouched, and spoke rapidly, earnestly:

"If you are really anxious to serve me, Bill, you must drop the trail you are on, and take up the right one. You promised to hunt out the real murderer—how can you keep your word if you butt your brains out against a rock that you can pass quietly around? If you want to serve me, find Miss Markham. Take up the trail for these men, do the best you know, and trust to time for the rest. Say you will do this—there is no other man here who would have one eye for my interest, while working for hers. You will go—as a favor to me, pard?"

"I'd go to h—l itself, ef you axed me, Jack—thar! Cuss the dust!" and Bill winked his eyes, savagely. "F you fellers 'spect me to trail fer ye, you'd best pick up your legs mighty lively—you hear?"

As he spoke, Comstock sprung up the rocks, not daring to cast a single glance backward. Colonel Markham hesitated for a moment, and there was a curious expression of mingled doubt and regret upon his face as he glanced at the prisoner, who had quietly returned to his former position beside his guards. Could this man be guilty of such cold-blooded crimes? And yet—why had the man, believing himself to be dying, why had he accused the prisoner, if innocent? And the proof of the murder was so plain!

With an effort the colonel brushed aside these reflections, and bidding Sergeant Bowen remain in command of the guards and their prisoner, he sprung into the saddle and rode rapidly around the rocky spur, then galloping on in pursuit of Comstock, who had already taken up the broken trail and was following it at a long, swift, loping stride.

There was little difficulty after this, for the trail was deep and broad, and within the hour Comstock paused at the foot of the ascent which led to the cavern in the hill.

Colonel Markham sprung from the saddle and led the way in person, entering the cavern without opposition. But here he was compelled to pause until materials could be collected for starting a fire, for none could tell what pitfalls lay before them, shrouded by the inky blackness.

Several torches were speedily constructed, and by their aid the cavern was hastily explored.

Though it was found untenanted by other than their own party, there were scattered around ample evidences that the retreat had not long been abandoned.

Comstock had not entered the cave, but busied himself looking for "sign," not without success. He found where the outlaws had kept their horses, and found, too, where Simoom and the little chestnut mare, which Kate Markham had ridden, had been tethered. He followed their trail back to the front of the cave, and when Colonel Markham returned, he pointed out two small footprints upon a bit of moist ground.

"Them was made by your daughter. The man with those big boots on, lifted her onto her critter—the same mar' which she rid that day back yester. Does that look like my pard stole her away las' night? An' he with us as airly as midnight?"

"You think, then, that that fellow lied? That my child is still with this party?" asked the colonel.

"I know he lied—an' if he lied in one thing, why not in the hull? Jack never had no more to do with killin' Cap' Stone than you did—not a durned bit!"

"I wish I could believe it—but the proof! the evidence is so strong—"

"Look here, boss. I kin prove he was with us steady from midnight, last night. Now call out any one o' your men as knows anythin' about trailin'. Ax him what time them tracks was made, afore dew-fall or a'ter dew-fall. I kin prove that the dew fell jest afore day fa'rly broke—come down most like a rain. Now that cuss back yester said my pard kerried off the gal afore he jined us, full twenty mile from here. Putt two an' two together; that's all I ax."

Colonel Markham said nothing, though Bill saw that his arguments were not lost, and he once more took up the trail, following it steadily and without a break until reaching the point where the outlaws had separated.

A brief scrutiny showed him that Simoom and the chestnut mare had not parted company, and that fact decided him which trail to follow. Five minutes later he halted, and at his signal, Colonel Markham advanced.

Comstock pointed to where the visible trail ended, then to several threads of woolen stuff scattered around.

"The jig's up, boss. The varmint's putt blanket-shoes on the critters. Nothin' shorter'n a four-legged hound could foller 'em now," quietly said the scout.

"It must—it shall be followed!" cried the father, half frantic with fear and suspense.

"Them's big words—easier to say than to live up to," was the deliberate response. "It mought be did, say a man crawled on his two knees an' nosed his way, so to speak—if he had plenty o' daylight an' nothin' else hindered. But look—the sun is down, an' wuss: you see them clouds? We'll have a rain afore day, sure as shootin'. You kin guess how much trail that'll leave."

A bitter groan burst from Markham's lips as he read the truth of the scout's words. Fate seemed against him in every shape.

"Find my child—find her, and you shall have all you ask. I will give you a thousand dollars—"

"I'd do it ef I could—not fer your money, though, but 'cause he axed me to. Ef thar was a show, I'd stick to it, but thar hain't. Thar's only two things you kin do. Send your men out to hunt the hills through; or pay the money as that bit o' paper told ye. Unless—mebbe you could wring the truth out o' that wounded cuss. He must know whar the rest was boun' fer. Putt him in my han's—let me hev my own way, an' I'll squeeze the hull truth out o' him ef man kin do it!"

The sun had set. The black, threatening clouds were rapidly overspreading the sky, and there was not the least possibility of finding the trail that evening. Reluctantly enough Colonel Markham gave the order to retrace their steps. Comstock rode beside him, two of the soldiers "doubling up" for the occasion; and the scout earnestly urged the case of his friend. The colonel seemed impressed, but finally said:

"He has been accused of murder—he must stand his trial. It shall be a full and impartial one, and if he can prove his innocence no man will be more pleased than I. But—if he is found guilty, though he were my own son, he should suffer the full penalty! I can listen to nothing more, though I honor your fidelity to your friend."

By the time they reached the little valley where Captain Stone had met his death, the darkness had become intense, and Colonel Markham gave orders for the company to go into camp for the night. The horses were securely tied, though feed there was none. Several fires were kindled, and, gathered around these, the soldiers munched their dry rations at their ease. Comstock gained the colonel's permission to keep Happy Jack company, on pledging his honor not to aid the prisoner in any manner to escape.

The two friends conversed in whispers, eager and seemingly persuasive on Bill's part, while

Happy Jack, though his voice was peculiarly soft and even affectionate, appeared to be steadily refusing to grant Comstock's request. The guards remained where they could see every motion, by the red glare of the fires, but not so near as to interfere with the privacy of the conversation.

As the evening wore on, the wounded man, Ben Watson, apparently grew worse. His head rolled uneasily from side to side, and he began to rave—uttering broken sentences, giving vague hints of a dark and troubled past, uttering words that caused little Doctor Hurlbutt's eyes to protrude with genuine horror, used as he was to such scenes.

"I shouldn't wonder if the wretch—why, just think!" he spluttered, addressing the colonel, while inspecting his pocket-case for a soporific. "If what the fellow says is true, he's murdered his own father and mother—and the rest of the family, for all I can say!"

It was with difficulty that he administered the drug, and the greater portion of it was spilled, but the portion swallowed by the patient seemed sufficient. The ravings gradually grew less frequent, the restless head became quiet, and an hour later the doctor pronounced Watson asleep, though greatly exhausted.

"I fear he'll never be able to bear transportation to the post, and yet—I can hardly understand it! The wound should not be so dangerous. It has cut no important artery, it has missed all vital organs—unless it has taken a diagonal course, from striking a bone. If I only had my tools—"

But no one listened to the worthy if prosy little doctor's words. Colonel Markham was too deeply concerned about his child, the men were too weary and sleepy. Four men were placed on guard, to be relieved at stated intervals, and then, seeking such shelter among the rocks as they could from the driving wind and threatening rain, the remainder composed themselves to sleep.

For some time Happy Jack and Comstock conversed over the mysterious events of the past day, striving in vain to see their way through the cloud that enveloped them, but their fatigue and broken rest asserted their claims, and side by side they lay down and in a few moments more were sleeping as soundly as though trouble and danger were not.

The storm held off until past midnight; then the low rumbling of thunder broke the silence, and quick flashes of lightning pierced the blackness. A huge drop of rain, cold as ice-water, struck upon the neck of the guard, and aroused his drooping senses. A vivid flash of lightning rendered all around distinct as day—and in that instant the sentinel caught a glimpse of a human figure stealing silently away. With a sharp cry he raised his carbine and fired.

Instantly the camp was aroused, and as he sprung to his feet, Colonel Markham shouted aloud:

"Look to the prisoners—shoot the first one that attempts to escape!"

But he was too late. The mischief was done!

CHAPTER XXIV.

BLACK HOLLOW.

STRAIGHT ahead rode Baby Tom, a broad smile upon his face, and a soft chuckle playing up and down in his big throat, as he recalled how adroitly he had "played" his captive. He looked little like a ruffian, save for his free and easy style of dress. A little soap and water, a little judicious trimming of the thick, curling beard and hair, would have discovered a comely if not handsome face, by nature filled full of good-humor and blunt honesty—and weakness. Time was when Thomas Bascom might have been pointed out as a model farmer, neighbor and husband; but whisky and cards changed all this, until now he was outlawed for more than one transgression of the law, was driven to live by the strong hand, to sleep beneath the black shadow of a dangling rope.

Choking down her emotions, Kate Markham covertly watched the movements of the party she had discovered, and once when Baby Tom turned his head away, she ventured to wave her hand toward them, hoping against hope that they would understand her appeal. Then, as if by magic, the horsemen vanished as utterly as though the earth beneath their feet had opened and swallowed them up.

The succeeding ten minutes were full of painful suspense to Kate, for Baby Tom, though clearly unsuspecting the vicinity to be occupied by other than himself and captive, had changed his course until heading almost directly for the spot where the strangers had disappeared. And her heart gave a wild bound as the four horsemen suddenly spurred into view, uttering loud cries as they dashed forward.

Baby Tom wrenched both horses to a standstill as though about to seek safety in flight, but a single glance showed him the truth, and with a glad cheer he rode forward to meet his friends, for these were the men whose absence was spoken of by Martha Bascom while freeing Happy Jack.

In a few hasty words Baby Tom gave them a synopsis of all that had transpired, and their reasons for seeking a new lair. Knowing the

value of caution, the men dismounted and carefully muffled the hoofs of their horses, then turned to bear the giant company to Black Hollow.

The time thus consumed was of great benefit to Kate. Her hopes had soared so high, the reality had proved so bitterly disappointing, that without those few minutes for regaining her composure, she must have given way entirely. As it was, the remainder of her long ride was little better than a blank. She was conscious of rapid, steady motion, but that was all.

The day was fully two-thirds spent when the little cavalcade came to a halt beside a narrow, but swift and turbulent stream that seemed to find birth beneath a gloomy, frowning mass of rocks and shrubbery, above which, almost perpendicular, without break or passage, towered the white face of a mountain.

"We're most to home, miss," uttered Baby Tom, as he dismounted and lifted Kate from her saddle, "Thar's a nasty bit to cross, yit, but you kin trust me to take you through all safe. Only—it's for your own good; you'd git skeered an' most likely pitch us both into the drink—an' I reckon a feller could go clean through a thrashin'-machine an' come out in better fix than he would through them rocks!"

Kate instinctively shrank back as she saw him propose to blindfold her eyes, but at the touch of his brawny hand she saw the folly of attempting resistance, and passively submitted to her fate. Bidding his followers look after the animals, Baby Tom raised the maiden in his arms, and passed up the stream, pressing the leafy screen as though about to attempt to scale the precipitous rocks. But instead, before him yawned a black opening through which the swift waters rushed with a hollow, rumbling roar. This opening somewhat resembled the mouth of a huge river. The roof and sides were of solid rock. Close to the edge of the water ran a narrow ledge, damp with spray and slime. Along this precarious trail, shrouded in almost inky blackness, Baby Tom moved slowly, feeling his way foot by foot, knowing that a single misstep, the slightest slip, would precipitate them both into the swirling waters to an almost certain death among the many sunken rocks and boulders. And, stout though his nerves were, the giant gave a long breath of relief as the faint glimmer of daylight ahead grew stronger and he emerged into a long, narrow valley.

Very appropriately had it been christened Black Hollow, for a more gloomy place could scarcely have been found out in the open air. The narrow valley was almost completely roofed in with the black and somber pines and firs that shot out from either side of the divided mountain. Only when the sun was directly overhead could its yellow light penetrate the secrets of the hidden valley. The day was twilight, the night utter blackness.

Baby Tom pressed through the dense shrubbery until he reached a small clearing in which stood several underbrush huts. Beside one of these he paused, and removing the bandage from Kate's eyes bade her enter. In silence she obeyed, and as the brush-wattled door was closed behind her she sunk wearily upon the pine-leaf littered floor, her spirit utterly broken by anxiety and fatigue. A few moments later she lay sleeping heavily.

When she awoke there was a tiny fire glowing in the center of the hut, and beside it crouched Martha Bascom, who raised her head with a wan smile as Kate started from her slumbers.

"Not a word!" cautiously uttered the woman, with a swift glance toward the door. "Listen, but do not speak. First, you must eat this bread and meat—I cooked it for you myself, while you were sleeping. I wish there was some tea or coffee, for you will need all your strength; but this and water must serve. Eat—then I will tell you all."

Kate's sleep had served one good purpose, since it restored her appetite, and after the first taste she ate as though she had been starved for days. Martha Bascom watched her in silence, but with an approving light in her eye, pressing bit after bit upon Kate until the maiden could eat no more.

Martha arose and opening the door glanced swiftly around her. Several fires were burning within the little clearing, yet their light was barely sufficient to reach the thick wall of vines and shrubbery beyond. Yet, far above, a thin line of sky was visible, and Kate knew that it was not yet night in the outer world.

Around the fires were lying a dozen or more men, some talking and smoking, others sleeping. Satisfied that all were there, Martha Bascom closed the door and drew Kate to the center of the hut. They sat down close beside the dying fire, and spoke in low, guarded whispers.

"I have learned much since we parted," began Martha, "more than enough to break my heart, had I any left. It was turned to stone long ago, and I am glad now. Hush! listen, but do not speak. There are wicked devils around us, and their ears are long and sharp. I can see that you doubt me—you think me crazy, as others have—but I'm not; the worse for me! There—enough of that! It is of you we must think. You are in danger here—great danger."

Not your life—that is safe, perhaps, but worse. You are in the presence of lawless men—and he is the worst. God pity me! that I should live to utter such words about my husband—he for whom I gave all—home, parents, my very soul!" and the woman pressed both hands almost fiercely upon her forehead.

"You are ill—do not speak any more since it pains you," said Kate, gently.

"I am well—I will not give way again," said Martha, and indeed she appeared another person as her will asserted itself. "I must speak, for you must know the danger that threatens, or your heart may fail you. You were told their reasons for capturing you, and I believe that they only intended to extort a large sum of money as the price of your freedom—at first. But he—my husband—has eyes, and he saw that you were very beautiful. It is hard to say—bah! what am I that the truth should frighten me?" and the woman laughed, low but bitterly.

"Thomas Bascom has resolved to extort this money from your father, and still keep you in his possession. Hist! if your cry reaches their ears, we are lost!"

For several minutes the two women maintained perfect silence, then the elder one opened the door to reconnoiter. All was quiet. The outlaws seemed unsuspecting, and she returned to the trembling maiden.

"I overheard them talking while you were sleeping. You are not to be set free when the ransom money is paid, but are to be frightened into a marriage with him, by threats of still worse treatment—"

"But—you are his wife—"

"Now—but I would not be, then. A single voice is easily hushed—a simple push into the water, and the rocks would do the rest. I overheard them talking it all over. If I stand in his way I must go to the wall. He said as much himself. And that is why I am here. It matters little what becomes of me—better dead than living, perhaps. But still there is enough of the woman left alive in me to fight against leaving him to be happy with another woman. I can save you, and I will, if you will trust me. I know this place well, I can lead you through the tunnel, and once outside we can easily find our way to your friends. But there is no time to lose. We must escape to-night, if at all. Now—one word. Will you go with me?"

"Yes—and may God bless you for your kindness!" sobbed Kate, terrified at the black revelation.

"We have only to wait, then, until the men are asleep. I have secured enough food for our journey, and have weapons, if we are forced to use them. Now lie down—pretend to sleep. They may suspect something, and come to spy upon us."

Those were long and weary hours that passed before Martha Bascom deemed it prudent to venture forth upon their truly hazardous undertaking, but all seemed well when, hand-in-hand they ventured forth from the hut. The darkness was intense save close around the dying camp-fires, but as if guided by instinct Martha Bascom led the way toward the river, the bank of which was gained without interruption. Apparently the outlaws considered themselves safe without the precaution of keeping guard.

"We must cross the river here," whispered Martha Bascom. "There is no path along the tunnel upon this side. The water is not deep, just here, though very swift. We can pass through easily, if you are only cool and steady-nerved. Keep close to me—hold fast to my dress, and there is no danger. Remember what fate you are leaving behind!"

Kate made no reply, but did as directed. The elder woman boldly entered the water and slowly pressed forward, though the current ran so swiftly that it tested their strength severely to avoid being swept from their feet. Though so narrow, it was a long and toilsome task, this crossing, and Martha Bascom uttered a sigh of relief as she drew near to the other shore.

At that moment a sharp challenge rung forth from directly in front—and then a blinding flash filled their eyes.

A wild, piercing shriek rung in Kate's ears, and she felt the dress torn from her grasp. She reeled—her feet slipped upon a slimy rock—the swift current whirled her from her footing, and with a scream of terror, she felt herself swept into deeper waters and hurled along with frightful velocity through the inky blackness. A choking, gurgling cry—then came a crushing blow—and all was a blank!

CHAPTER XXV.

PLOTTING AND PLANNING.

SLOWLY and wearily the days and nights crept along to the four occupants sheltered within the little cavity in the rock wall overlooking the oval valley within which the White Sioux had placed his braves in ambush. The long and hard gallop from Crooked Valley had greatly aggravated the wounds of Kenekuk, the young warrior, and for many a weary hour Eunora, his sister, crouched beside him, doing brave battle with death with the scanty appliances at hand, seeming unconscious of fatigue, only consenting to close her eyes when there came a change for the better, when her skill

said that the crisis was past—that Kenekuk would not die upon his first war-path.

It was the third day after the White Sioux had left them to ride on to the aid of his people. Throughout that day the sun had beaten down hotly upon the rocks, and the atmosphere within the rocky den was almost stifling. Eunora had moved her patient close to the entrance, and now sat beside him. The two braves were sleeping soundly beyond.

"Listen, sister," and Kenekuk would have lifted his head only for the little brown hand that gently pressed him back. "I can hear the trampling of horses—our father is returning!"

Eunora made no reply in words, but carefully parting the leafy screen, she peered eagerly up the valley. The sound of hoof-strokes upon the flinty ground grew clearer and more distinct—then a small cavalcade rounded the turn and rode into full view. No Indians were they—one glance told the dusky maiden so much. But why did her eyes dilate—her lips part and turn pale? What caused that sharp, painful moan?

Kenekuk looked at her paling face in wonder—then painfully lifted his head until he too could look out upon the valley and its occupants.

He saw seven horsemen trotting steadily through the valley. He saw that six were well armed—but the seventh? Instead of bearing weapons, this man's hands were bound behind his back—a stout rope led from ankle to ankle beneath the horse's belly. A prisoner—yet the proudest, kingliest man among them all! Tall and erect, his proud head rising its own height above those of the men who led him captive. And a low exclamation parted Kenekuk's lips as he recognized the man who had so adroitly baffled the plans of the White Sioux on the day of the festival.

As though the exclamation was loud enough to reach his ears, one of the six men cast a quick, piercing glance upward as his mustang bore him by. Instinctively the young brave drew back, but his hand was powerless to move Eunora. As though fascinated, her eyes never withdrew until the escort and their prisoner disappeared near the mouth of the pass.

"You saw him?" asked Kenekuk, as the maiden bowed her head upon her hands. "The man who looked up as they rode past? He is a great brave! He should be a child of the Sioux."

"I saw him not, brother," and Eunora lifted her head, a strange fire in her wonderful eyes. "I saw but the brave whose hands were tied; and as I saw that, my mind went back to the black moon when the spotted death stole into the lodges of our people, to the day when we were at war with the pale-faces, and there was none among our people to send for the great medicine that alone could cure them—none but Eunora. She alone among the squaws could talk the white man's tongue, and to send a brave would only be to send him to his death. So the great chief, our father, bade her go, and Eunora obeyed. She rode without pause until her horse fell dead. She ran on, carrying the gold that was to buy back the lives of her people. She bought the medicine—and a stout horse to bear her home. But as she rode away from the big lodge, five pale-faces met her. Their blood was hot with the fire-water that had stolen away their brains.

"They spoke black words to Eunora, and when she sought to pass them by, they dragged her from her horse, though one of their number felt the sharp point of her knife bite deep into his black heart. Eunora struggled, but death and worse than death would have been hers, only the Great Spirit sent her aid. Like an angel of light another white face rode up—he struck swift and sure, and Eunora was free. Eunora thanked him—her words came hot from her heart, and he spoke soft words to her and bound up her hurts, while his friend stood by, laughing. He caught the runaway horse, and offered to ride with her, but she remembered her people and his people were at war, and thanked him.

"From that day to this, my brother, his face has been in my heart—but never, until now, did his face meet my hungry eyes. And now—his life is in danger—for that was he that rode before us, a prisoner!"

"We are but four—one a squaw, one a cripple! what can we do? Kenekuk would give his life for the brave pale-face, if that would set him free."

"He saved Eunora—she will save him, or die," softly uttered the maiden, her big eyes glowing.

"If our father was here—bitterly as he hates the white faces, he would dare anything to pay the debt which his child owes this yellow-haired chief. He may come in time—Leapah can go to meet him—"

"The White Sioux is mighty, but can he ride over the big fort out yonder? No; there must be some other way, and Eunora will find it, or die at his side."

Kenekuk gazed wistfully at the face of his sister, but did not speak. Though children of a white father and half-white mother, they had been reared among Indians and had imbibed many of their prejudices, superstitions and peculiar principles of honor. Himself helpless,

unable to stand alone, much less aid another, he could not attempt to dissuade his sister from the resolve she had taken.

Only for a few minutes did Eunora remain quiescent. Then she awoke Leapah, and briefly bade him transform her face as thoroughly as paint and pigments would do it. In silence he obeyed, not even allowing his stolid features to express the curiosity he undoubtedly felt. In a few moments his work was done. Then Eunora ruthlessly tore off the rich ornaments from her dress, cutting and soiling the soft fawn-skin until it hung around her in ugly rags. Moistening her hands, she rubbed black paint and dirt upon her hair until its rare glory was obscured. Then, bidding the two braves keep close watch and ward, she silently pressed her lips to the forehead of her brother and noiselessly stole down the rocky wall.

She passed down the valley, pausing at the entrance and gazing steadily at the fort. It lay silent and grim—seemingly devoid of life. But she knew that it contained her heart, and without faltering she advanced toward the building.

At nearly the same moment a single man emerged from the big gate, and strode forward as though to meet her. Though her heart throbbed high, Eunora did not hesitate. A deep glow filled her eyes as she recognized the man. It was Bill Comstock, the scout, and she knew that he was coming to meet her. She paused, but the eager look upon the scout's face changed to one of doubt and disappointment as he drew near.

"Wa-al I ber-durned!" and he stared in open-mouthed astonishment. "'Pears like the hull creation is turned outside in! I came to find a angel, an' she's turned—"

"Then Double-eye is not quite blind? He can see the face of a friend when it comes before him?"

"I saw you back yester—that's what I came out alone fer. But it takes two good looks to see you now!"

"The Indian girl can see better. Her eyes can look back and see two men who were friends and brothers. And to-day she saw the same men, one bound with stout cords, the other riding by him with rifle and pistol, ready to take his life—"

"Ef you was a man, I'd dreen your heart dry fer them words," interrupted Comstock, his eyes gleaming, his voice husky with emotion. "Even a squaw cain't say 'em twice—mind that!"

"He was bound, you were free. There were but five others. Yet the man you called brother was carried to the fort, and the trail was as big at the end as at the beginning."

"It wouldn't 'a' bin, only he swore me to keep the peace—he said he'd cuss me ef I tempted to set him free. What could I do? A dozen times I give him the chalice to run fer life, while I kept them back—but he wouldn't do it," and in as few words as possible Comstock told Eunora exactly how the case stood.

"Thar's only one chalice fer him—since he won't take no help from me. That varmint giv' us the slip, in the big rain. We looked an' s'arched all one day, but the trail was washed away, an' we couldn't find him. He knows the truth, an' ef I could find him I'd wring it out o' him ef I hed to skin him alive. But if I go off to s'arch fer him, who'll look over my pard? He hain't no friends thar—none but me," dejectedly added Bill.

"Tell me what this man is like, and if he is above ground, I will have him found," quickly said Eunora.

Comstock gave a careful description of Ben Watson.

"He shall be found. You must make all the delay you can. If you can talk with Sky-eyes, bid him not despair. Say that true friends are working for him. If one plan fails, another must succeed. Tell him from me that he must live to prove his innocence and punish his foes. Say that none but cowards sit down quietly to die the undeserved death of a dog. If I could only see him—do you think there is any chance of that?" Eunora added, eager longing filling her eyes.

"I'm afraid not," was the slow reply, and a shade of sorrow passed over the scout's face that was not all born of the peril of his friend, as he saw how wholly the maiden's heart was occupied by Happy Jack. "The old man give mighty strict orders—indeed he told them, unbeknown to me, that they mustn't even let me see the lad alone! That's what they told me in yester, but I pulled this pet," tapping the butt of his revolver, "an' the cowards swallered my password, an' never once opened their heads ag'inst it. But with you—I don't know. You kin come to-morrow. Well, I'll do what I kin, but don't count too much on't. 'Bout that feller—you'll hev him hunted up!"

The maiden nodded impatiently.

"If alive, he will be handed over to you. But—if the worst comes, we must be prepared for that. If—if your friend is doomed to die, beg him to ask to be shot. If that is granted, try all you can to have the—the execution removed as far as possible from the fort. If you can succeed in that, there is hope even at the side

of the grave. Eunora is but a squaw—but her voice is powerful enough to insure him life, there."

"You mean a charge—Injuns—" eagerly began Bill.

"If you know nothing, you cannot be charged with plotting against your people. Do what I say, and all will be well. Go, now; but come to the valley to-morrow. Tell your brother that the Indian girl has not forgotten—that his kindness is here—in my heart!"

Then, as though afraid to trust her tongue further, Eunora turned and glided through the twilight back to the valley.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AWAITING THE VERDICT.

HOWEVER long to others, these days were all too short to Colonel Markham, though each hour was one of bitter disappointment, of never ceasing anxiety, of wearing suspense that left its mark in the deepening lines of care that seamed the soldier's ruddy face and left deep hollows around his blood-shot eyes. From the first gleam of dawn until the shadows of night he was in the saddle and ranging far and wide among the rocky wastes, searching for some sign that might guide him to the spot where his idolized child was held in bondage; but all was in vain. Since that stormy night—on which, as Comstock told Eunora, the wounded outlaw, Ben Watson, had escaped, after so adroitly feigning deathly illness—all trace of the fugitives was lost. Day after day the scouts quartered through the wilds, urged on by treble wages and the promise of a heavy reward in case of success. They did all that man could, but even their skill was useless. And so, on the fifth night, they respectfully told the colonel as much.

He heard them in silence, for he knew that their words were true, and after a few moments of bitter silence, he asked his men what, in their opinion, would be the wisest course for him to pursue. In answer Lieutenant Blake spoke, and to the point.

"They can have but one hope in holding Miss Markham in captivity—and that is money. If you agree to pay the demanded ransom, and promise the rascals immunity, I feel sure that they will restore the lady, safe and uninjured."

"But how can we send them word? If we knew where, I would have carried my answer long ago."

"There is one way. Post notices in a dozen conspicuous places—among them the cave in Crooked Valley—saying that you accept their terms, and request a meeting. Sooner or later they will find them, if we leave this region and give them a chance to leave their hole without fear of discovery. This is what I would do, in your place."

"The lieutenant speaks right to the bull's-eye, colonel," said John McLoon, head of the scouts since Comstock and his chum were absent. "You'll fetch 'em that way. Make all the promises the varmints ax—sw'ar that no man under your command will tetch 'em. Then you kin discharge me an' the boys fer a week or two, an' ef we don't fetch in both the money an' thar skelps, I'll eat my hat!"

Through the night Colonel Markham weighed the matter well, and seeing no shorter way out of the dilemma, lost no time in putting Blake's plan into operation. The notices were written and posted in conspicuous places, that at the cavern being written upon the wall in huge letters. And then, weary, jaded and heavy-hearted, the party turned their heads toward the fort, entering its gates as the sun sunk to rest below the western horizon.

Bill Comstock carried the tidings to his friend, Happy Jack, who received the communication in silence.

"I caught some words as I came 'long—some thin' 'bout a court-martial," said Comstock, slowly. "But that's fool-talk, sence you've never bin swore in. They cain't do no more than turn you over to the law, kin they?"

"Law is a dead letter here, pard," replied Happy Jack, with a half-laugh. "If there is any trial, it must be by a military court. I would rather trust my life to that, than a regular jury. I only hope they will run it through without delay."

"Ef we could only find that cussed snake—I'm goin' out to see ef the Injun girl hes hearn anythin' yet. Ef not, we've got to think up some other place."

Bill left the fort and met Eunora near the mouth of the valley, but there was no news. Leapah had not yet returned. For a full hour the two consulted, and finally came to a decision as to what their course should be in case the worst befell. They parted, and Comstock, full of a new hope, hastened back to the fort and demanded rather than asked an interview with Colonel Markham. He was admitted, after a brief delay. The colonel apparently had been holding a council with his officers.

"Your friend will be tried for murder, by court-martial, to-morrow," said the colonel, answering the scout's look, rather than his salutation. "I tell you this that you may carry him word. He may need time to arrange his defense."

"Ef the truth was known, he wouldn't need a minute, colonel. The man's a low-down fool as could even dream of my pard's shootin' a man from ahind, inemy or no inemy. Ef you hedn't let that pizen snake slip—"

"I am suffering for that more deeply than you can, Bill. I would give my right hand to have him here, this minute!"

"Putt off this trial, then, an' give me a chainte to find him," eagerly cried the scout. "Ef he's atop o' earth, I'll find an' fetch him in. Jest give me a week—it's all I ax—"

"At ten o'clock to-morrow the court will sit. There has been a foul murder done, and the assassin must suffer. If the prisoner is innocent, he will be cleared—if guilty, he shall die—that is sworn to."

"Colonel, ef you only knew who an' what he is, you'd give him this one chainte. Ef I could only tell ye!—but he swore he'd cuss me with his dyin' breath ef I should! Ef you only knowed! Mebbe he'd tell you ef you'd ax him. Won't you try? Tain't often I ax a favor of anybody, but, colonel, Jack is dearer to me than life—I'd even go down on my knees to you, fer him. Tain't so much fer you to do—jest go an' ax him who he is—ax him who was his mother an' father—stick to him ontel he tells you. Make him tell, or give me leave to tell what I know, an' I'll serve you, colonel, I'll be your dog day an' night!"

The scout's voice broke, and though he turned his face quickly aside, Colonel Markham saw that his bronzed cheek was wet with tears. He saw this, and it broke down his opposition. Gently touching Comstock's arm, he said:

"I will make the attempt you ask—come."

Together they entered the guard-house, and in a few words the colonel made known the object of his visit. Happy Jack listened in silence, then produced a small, flat parcel from his bosom, wrapped in oiled silk and securely sealed.

"What you seek to know is written here. Take it—on one condition. If I am found innocent at the court-martial to-morrow, you pledge your honor to return the parcel to me, unopened. If guilty—keep the seals unbroken until after the sentence is executed—then you are at liberty to read. Will you pledge me your honor on this?"

"Since you ask it, yes. And yet—how can this concern me? I never met you before last spring—"

"You hold the explanation in your hand," coldly interrupted the prisoner. "Now—I am weary, gentlemen. Good-night!"

Day dawned and the hour appointed for the trial arrived and passed. The prisoner was arraigned before the court. But one witness was admitted at a time, and even Bill Comstock was excluded. The trial was not of long duration, and as the reader has already heard all the evidence that could influence the case, a repetition is not necessary. The prisoner was allowed to speak in his own behalf, but said only a few words, then submitted his case. He was conducted back to the guard-house, and the court proceeded to weigh the evidence, with closed doors.

Comstock accompanied Jack, and when the door was closed upon them both—for he defied the guards to remove him, and they honored his sturdy fidelity to his friend too thoroughly to use force—he again pleaded with Jack for permission to speak.

"Tain't too late even now, pard! Jest give me the word, an' I'll let him know—I'll bu'st in the door, ef they won't open! Let me tell him, an' he must give you a chainte. Say I may—fer God's sake, pard—"

"Hush, Bill—you ask too much," said Happy Jack, gently. "All you could say would make no difference if they have believed me guilty. It would look as though I was trying to sneak out of the scrape like a guilty coward. You have sworn that you would not speak until I give you the word. If you break that oath, I will come back from the grave to haunt you—"

The door opened, and Sergeant Bowen entered, followed by a file of soldiers. His honest face was grave and his eyes full of the compassion his lips dare not utter.

"They've found he didn't do it—you've come to set him free!" eagerly cried Bill, grasping Bowen's hands and wringing them with an almost insane ardor.

"I have orders to bring you before the court, Jack. By mighty! it's the hardest duty I ever met!" and the sergeant blew his nose fiercely.

"I expected as much—and yet, God knows that I am innocent of this crime. Lead on, old man. I don't blame you!"

Comstock kept close to the prisoner's side, and as the sentinel attempted to keep him from entering the court-room, one swift blow hurled him senseless to the ground, and Comstock entered the room, molested no further.

Colonel Markham looked at him sternly, but he saw the fierce, almost insane glitter in the scout's eyes, and really feeling for him, made no objection to his presence.

"Prisoner," he began, solemnly. "You have been accused of willful murder. You have had a fair and impartial, if a little irregular, trial. We have carefully weighed the evidence against

your statement, and, while giving you the benefit of many doubtful points, find that you, and you alone, are guilty of the death of Captain Lawrence Stone. You are now brought before us to have sentence passed upon you. Have you anything to offer as reason why judgment should be delayed?"

"Only what I have already said—I am innocent, before God!"

"You have been tried and found guilty of murder. The proof of this is so overwhelming that the decision is unanimous. The sentence of this court is that you shall suffer death in punishment for your crime; but in consideration of your past services, instead of hanging, you shall be shot to death, at sunset, to-morrow—and may God have mercy upon your soul!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE HOUR OF DOOM.

NEVER a muscle of Happy Jack's sternly set face changed as he listened to the solemnly pronounced sentence of death, but as the colonel's voice died away, a shrill, peculiar laugh filled the little room, and Bill Comstock glided forward, pausing beside the doomed prisoner, leaning heavily upon the pine table, his black, burning eyes slowly passing from one to another of the five judges.

"You've did a mighty big day's work, gentlemen—five o' ye to sw'ar away the life of a innocent feller-critter! I'm glad ye all voted one way—it'll save the trouble o' pickin' an' choosin'—"

"One word more, Comstock, and I place you in irons!" sternly cried Colonel Markham.

"For my sake, pard, rein in," hurriedly muttered Happy Jack, his stout hand closing upon Comstock's shoulder. "They'll shut you out from me, and you are the only friend I have, now. Choke down what you feel—apologize, if you can."

"I reckon this 'ere thing's driv' me nigh about crazy, boss," said Comstock, addressing Colonel Markham. "Mebbe I spoke too loud, jest now—you won't lay it up ag'inst him, colonel? I reckon he'd make a white man out o' me, ef you'd only give him time—"

"That will do. Sergeant, escort the prisoner back to the guard-house. Place a double guard on duty, and see that no person whatever is allowed admittance to the prisoner without a permit signed by me. You may go."

"Cept me, boss—you won't try to shet me away from him?" quickly uttered Comstock.

"You have your orders, sergeant," said Markham, coldly.

"Not a word, pard," muttered the prisoner. "I am ready, Bowen."

The file of soldiers closed around the doomed scout and escorted him to the guard-house. Close upon their heels trod Bill Comstock, a vicious glitter in his black eyes, and the men who had gathered to watch the brief spectacle interchanged quick glances, for they felt that there was "music in the air." The keen eye of Sergeant Bowen did not overlook these signs, and he muttered in Happy Jack's ear:

"Comstock will make a fool of himself; and get hurt, unless you can make him hear reason, friend. We have our orders, and must carry them out, but I don't want to hurt him. Try what you can do with him."

As the door was reached, the prisoner turned around, and, with a gesture commanding attention, spoke:

"Gentlemen, allow me one word with my friend, since he cannot share my imprisonment. Bill, old man, you mean well, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for standing by me so faithfully. You heard my sentence, and know that I have never done ought to deserve it. There is another who knows this—try to find him, Bill, for my sake."

"I'm sech a durned fool I wouldn't know him if he war right under my nose—but I'll try, pard. Good-by! I'll be back here afore that time, an' ef somethin' don't turn up to let in daylight, they's goin' to be jest the liveliest little circus in these parts—you hear me!"

Sergeant Bowen cut short the interview, and as Happy Jack was shut in, he briefly gave the guard their orders, then signed to Comstock to follow him. Passing beyond earshot of the curious soldiers, the two men conversed eagerly for several minutes, after which they warmly shook hands, and Comstock, rifle in hand, led his horse through the side gate, mounted and galloped swiftly away.

Within his gloomy prison, Happy Jack sat pondering over the chain of events that had so swiftly led him to an almost certain death. Knowing his utter innocence of the crime for which he had been doomed to suffer a shameful death, he was unable to prove this, was even unable to guess who might be the true criminal. That Captain Stone had been foully murdered, he could not for one moment doubt—but whose the hand which struck him down? Therein lay the mystery. He had heard no pistol-shot save his own and one other. Until the weapons told their story, he had believed the two shots were fired by himself and the outlaw, Ben Watson. Could it be possible that a third shot had been fired so simultaneously with the others that it had escaped his notice in the excitement? That

seemed the only solution; yet who had held the fatal weapon?

All was a black mystery, and the scout racked his brain in vain for a plausible solution, until, with an impatient sigh, he flung aside the bewildering tangle and forced his mind to busy itself with other thoughts. This was not so difficult as it may appear. As he closed his eyes a bright, beautiful vision stood before him—the image of the fair young woman whom he first met at the feast given in honor of her birthday—Kate Markham. And yet his thoughts were far from pleasing. He knew that she was not for him, even were he to escape the disgraceful doom which hung over his head. He knew that there was an impassable barrier between them—that they could never be nearer to each other than now. Then he forced himself to think of that other fair maiden—of the Indian girl who was working so earnestly for his salvation—of Eunora, daughter of the White Sioux. Bill Comstock had told him of all she was doing—of what she had pledged her father to accomplish, if the worst came to worst.

"Why not?" he muttered, unconsciously speaking his thoughts aloud. "Why should I die for a crime another committed? If I give my consent the thing is done. Have these men treated me so generously that I need die the death of a dog rather than see a few drops of their blood shed? There are more ways of living than one. And if what Bill says is true, there would be another to share my lot. And yet—!"

Slowly the hours rolled by, and still the doomed prisoner sat upon his low pallet, thinking, thinking steadily with his eyes fixed on vacancy, only the swift changes as they swept athwart his countenance telling that he was more than a senseless statue. Only his eyes moved when a soldier brought him in food and drink; moved for one moment, then returned to the narrow thread of sunlight upon the floor that marked the passage of time. The lips of the soldier parted, and there was a peculiar glitter in his eye, but a sound from without seemed to check the words he would have uttered, and tapping upon the door, it opened and closed behind his form.

Night came, dragged its weary length along, and when the gray light of dawn stole through the narrow, grated window, it fell upon the white face of the prisoner, who still crouched upon his pallet, his eyes staring steadily as when the now rising sun had sunk to rest. A sound came to his ears, and his cheek flushed quickly as he straightened up, listening intently. There were words without the door, then the barrier swung open, giving admittance to the form of Bill Comstock.

The eyes of the two friends met, and the warm flush faded from the prisoner's face, for he knew now that his wild hope was without foundation.

"Don't blame me, pard," and the scout's voice was husky as he spoke. "I did try, but 'twasn't no use. I couldn't stay away no longer, knowin' that the time was runnin' away so fast—'twas like a rope was tied round my heart, the one eend here, an' the more I pulled away the harder it pulled back. Call me a fool, ef you like, pard, but I cain't help it! What little time thar is left us, I want to spend it long o' you. Ef you say go—I'll go; but I'll blow my fool heart out at the doorstep—so thar!"

Happy Jack tried to speak, but there was a great swelling in his throat, and, manlike, he feared to force the words lest he should break down completely. Instead he clasped the scout's hand, and the two men sat down, side by side, too full for speech. And Happy Jack knew that the world could not be so bad, after all, since there was left him a friend so true, so whole-hearted as this.

Let those who knew him testify. Rough, unlettered, superstitious Bill Comstock—a heart of purest gold was his!

Thus the two friends sat until high noon. Then the door opened and little Dr. Hurlbut, entered, and grasping the prisoner's hand, he shook it vigorously.

"There! I said I'd do it—I told those pompous fools that they had sentenced an innocent man, whose little finger was worth double their souls lumped together—I told them that, and dared them to cashier me. I came here to say that you've got one friend, my boy—that's me! Don't give up yet—we're doing all we can for you; don't despair even when you stand facing the muskets. If nothing else will do, blamed if I don't kick up a mutiny and blow all creation to thunder!"

"Don't get into trouble on my account, doctor," and Happy Jack laughed as he grasped Hurlbut's hand. "Now tell me—what is the programme? I might as well be learning my part in the play."

"You know the hour. The place is just beyond the pavilion. There will be a general muster—for sake of the example, the old man says, but I told him it was because he was afraid your friends would kick up a muss! The firing party is under command of Sergeant Bowen—a stout friend of yours, my boy. And—that is all, I believe. I can't stop. Bill, I'm going to cuss the colonel a little, and I want you

to back me up. Maybe we can scare him into postponing the hour."

Happy Jack nodded, and Comstock accompanied the doctor, grasping at the faintest hope. But as the hours crept by and Bill did not return, the prisoner's wonder grew into painful anxiety. Could it be that there was a plot in working for his rescue? Or—and it seemed as though the last gleam of light was blotted out—was all this but a ruse to separate him from his last friend? a trick to draw Comstock where he could be placed under arrest without disturbance, and thus insure his giving no trouble when the execution was taking place?

Happy Jack arose and held out his hands as Lieutenant Blake entered at the head of a file of soldiers, to lead him to the place of execution. In silence the handcuffs were applied, and the doomed man was led out from the silent fort. He saw that all was in readiness for the tragic act. The soldiers were drawn up in line. The officers were standing together, a little apart. And behind them, his face white and sternly set, was Bill Comstock. A sudden impulse seized upon Happy Jack, and he begged the lieutenant to allow him one word with Colonel Markham. The request was granted, and pausing before the group of officers, Happy Jack raised his handcuffed wrists and saluted.

"Colonel Markham, I have one favor to ask of you. Nay," he added, quickly, as the colonel made a gesture; "you are the last man on earth of whom I would ask mercy. What I meant was—when you are through with your little amusement, please pass over what is left of me to my friend, Mr. Comstock. Will you consent to this?"

Colonel Markham nodded shortly, then turned away. With a firm step, the doomed man strode on to the spot where a plain pine coffin lay covered with an army blanket, then turned and faced the firing party, a proud, half-defiant glow upon his handsome face.

"Make a sure thing of it, boys," he said, with a low, musical laugh. "Just imagine the White Sioux or some other rascal stands before you, and send your bullets home!"

"Is there anything I can do for you—any message?" cried Dr. Hurlbut, as he hastened up.

Jack started, then said:

"Yes! tell my friends that I died for the crime of another. Before God! I am innocent!"

The doctor grasped his hands and seemed to be speaking earnestly. When he withdrew, the scout's head was bowed, and his stout form was seen to tremble. But only for a moment. Lifting his head and gazing proudly around, he faced his executioners.

The surgeon paused a few steps away. Bill Comstock glided nearer, one hand grasping a revolver, his eyes glowing like fire.

Colonel Markham waved his hand. A single, long-drawn note was sounded by the bugler. The shooting party leveled their weapons. Sergeant Bowen gave the fatal command. Like one report the six muskets vomited forth their contents.

Happy Jack swiftly raised his manacled hands to his breast, turned half-around, staggered one step forward, then fell heavily upon his face beside the pine coffin.

Dr. Hurlbut ran forward and stooped over the body, turning it so that the white face looked up to heaven. And upon the breast of the corpse the red blood was quickly spreading. The six muskets had done their duty!

Bill Comstock uttered a wild yell, and leaping forward, fell upon his knees at the side of the coffin. Dr. Hurlbut arose, and his voice rung out, cold and sternly:

"The man is dead—shot through the heart!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"THE JOURNEY OF DEATH."

As the sharp report and blinding flash quickly followed the stern challenge, it seemed to Martha Bascom that the whole of her face had been blown away, so heavy was the shock, so intense the pain. Uttering a wild scream of agony, she staggered back, then fell heavily, just as the swift current swept Kate Markham from her foothold. More by instinct than owing to any fixed purpose, Martha Bascom flung out her arms and grasped firm hold of a projecting root, the swift waters whirling her body around until she lay close along and partially under the low, overhanging bank.

She heard the man who had fired the pistol-shot spring into the water with a loud, warning cry, and she knew that he had recognized her companion—for loud above the rushing waters his voice rung out in warning that the captive was attempting an escape. She knew that the outlaws were fully aroused—and for a moment she almost resolved to release her grasp upon the friendly root and trust herself to the mercy of the river rather than that of her husband. But then came another thought. Often as she had wished for death, now that it almost stared her in the face, she shrank from it, appalled.

She heard the loud voice of Baby Tom, and that nerved her. With a desperate effort she crawled up the steep bank. But where could she go? She heard a loud shout come from the mouth of the tunnel nearest her; that avenue of

escape was shut off. From beyond the river came the uncertain gleam of torches being kindled. She heard Baby Tom plunge into the river, and lent strength by the emergency, she arose and glided across to the foot of the steep, almost perpendicular mountain. Clutching vines and branches of the stunted shrubbery that veiled the hillside, she toiled on and upward, thinking only of eluding the fiercely-cursing men below, though she knew that each foot of progress was won at the imminent peril of her life.

She saw the blazing torches flitting to and fro, borne by fiercely-cursing men, and when one came nearer than the others, she lay still, afraid that the painful throbbing of her heart would betray her presence; and then, as the torch receded, she would draw herself up and on through the inky blackness. She saw the torches disappear within the tunnel, and knew that this was her one chance. With a strength and dexterity born of the emergency, she clambered on, more than once escaping a fall that could have been nothing less than death, yet pressing on and upward until her overtired muscles refused to bear her further, and a deathlike faintness crept over her. Struggling resolutely against this, Martha Bascom leaned against the scrubby pine tree while she unslung the pouch of provisions, which she had provided for their journey from her back, and with the stout leather strap bound herself fast to the tree, yet in such a manner that she could back against the nearly perpendicular bank.

None too soon was this precaution taken. Her senses gave way, and for many a long hour she lay like one dead. Below, the river brawled and roared; the outlaws passed and repassed, and once their loud, angry voices grew low and almost fearful as they passed slowly along, the red, glowing torches lighting up a still, white-faced figure borne in their midst. Above, the storm elements were doing fierce battle. Heavy raindrops were borne upon the fiercely-hawling winds, the thunder rolled and crashed, the forked lightning rent the inky clouds with awesome splendor. But where the senseless woman lay, the atmosphere was only gently disturbed, nor could the driving rain reach her, as yet.

As the night grew older, little rills of water came creeping down the steep hillside, here and there, growing stronger and gaining power with each moment, spreading and increasing in number until the entire slope was moistened. Every now and then some huge boulder, loosened by the penetrating moisture, would slide and leap and thunder down the hill until it plunged with a sullen splash into the rising waters below. And through it all Martha Bascom lay like one dead; and when day began to dawn, and the wild storm to abate, the waters had done their work thoroughly. Not a sign remained to tell Baby Tom that his wife had not been swallowed up by the turbid river—the trail her hasty flight had left was forever washed away.

When consciousness returned and her eyes opened to renewed life, Martha Bascom saw that day had dawned, bright and glorious overhead. Below her all was gloomy and indistinct. She looked around for a more secure shelter, but there was none, and fearing to remain where she was, knowing nothing of what the friendly waters had done for her, and fearing with each moment to hear the dreaded voice of her husband, she removed the strap, and securing the dampened provisions, turned her face toward the hill-crest and dragged her aching limbs on and upward. The saturated soil rendered her task doubly difficult, and after nearly an hour of severe labor, Martha Bascom found that she had ascended barely a dozen feet. In despair she paused upon the trunk of a leaning tree. Her brain seemed on fire—her limbs were almost helpless, yet full of pain. She glanced downward, and felt tempted to end all in one desperate plunge. Was life worth the living?

And then, one by one the events of her past life seemed to unfold their hidden leaves, to stand plainly before her. She covered her eyes, but the visions would not away. The dead seemed to arise, their mournful or reproaching eyes looking down into her very heart—and she could hear their voices in the low whispering of the morning breeze as it eddied through the stiff foliage around and about her. A bitter groan parted the white lips, as she raised her head and cast a fearful glance around.

"I will do what I can to make amends—I have repented, God knows! Mother in heaven! am I going mad?"

The fear of this gave her strength to fight back the visions of a dead past, and to measure the full force of her present situation. She saw that the ascent was one that would severely task the powers of the strongest and most active man; and yet, she felt that, wounded and wearied as she was, she could accomplish thefeat unless discovered by watchful eyes below. But to do this, she must nurse her strength, and opening the pouch, she forced herself to eat of the contents, though the act seemed painful. Her cheek, through which the sentinel's bullet had torn, was very much swollen, but she could only bind it up with a rag torn from her dress.

This done, she once more resumed her strug-

gles, fearing to delay; for, though she had an abundance of provisions, water there was none. Many a backward glance she cast, but the valley below was shrouded in gloom. A shudder shook her form at the thought that at any moment she might be discovered by some one of the outlaws, though unseen himself. And then—she knew that a rifle-shot would end all, were she to refuse their command to descend; perhaps his hand would hold, his eye direct the fatal weapon!

Foot by foot—almost inch by inch—she crept on and upward, frequently forced to pause by her failing powers. The hours rolled by. The sun passed across the narrow rift and vanished from view; yet the summit seemed as far away as ever. Then—a treacherous root gave way, just as the woman's whole weight depended from it, and down she fell, hurled from point to point until the same tree-trunk to which she had bound herself the night before, arrested her further fall. She hung across the tree, like one dead.

A loud shout came from below, and a moment later a rifle exploded, the bullet burying itself just above the falling figure. The voice of Baby Tom began to curse the marksman, whose hasty shot might betray their retreat to those who were hunting their lives; and abashed the ruffian slunk away, believing, as Baby Tom declared, that he had been deceived by a falling bush or broken limb.

A few minutes later Martha Bascom struggled back to consciousness, and managed once more to bind herself to the tree-trunk. She knew now that the ascent was beyond her power. The fall had bruised her terribly. It seemed to her that she was dying. The trees around her were nodding and dancing, keeping time to a weird melody that seemed ringing through her brain. And then—a mist overspread her eyes—her head drooped against the earth—all was a blank.

How long she lay in this deathlike trance, Martha Bascom never knew. The hours and days had passed over her head unheeded. It was night when her eyes opened. All was black and silent as death. Even the river below seemed to have ceased its complainings for the moment.

With a steady, unfaltering hand, Martha Bascom unbuckled the strap that held her to the tree-trunk. She rose, grasped a slender bush and lowered herself to the full length of her arms. Her feet rested upon the end of a rock; and repeating the operation, never once hesitating or appearing in doubt, she worked her way down the face of the hill and stood safely beside the river. For a few moments she stared steadily across to where the outlaws' huts lay shrouded in the dense obscurity, but then she shook her head decisively, and gliding along the bank, entered the tunnel, treading the narrow path, passing the many unseen dangers as readily as though crossing the smoothest floor, reaching the moonlight beyond in safety.

Here she paused as though for reflection, presently turning and skirting the base of the hill for several hundred yards. Entering a narrow pass, she proceeded until a narrow valley lay before her. Passing through the bushes she came to a rude but strong corral, containing a number of horses. She entered and followed the snorting animals to the further end. She spoke a few words of soothing, and then wound her fingers in the bushy mane of Simoom. The noble animal followed her without an effort to break away, and stood quietly beside her while she pulled a saddle and bridle from among others beneath a pile of brush. She adjusted these, then left open the bars as she sprung into the saddle and rode rapidly away.

The noble steed obeyed her slightest gesture, and a wild, erratic trail the twain left behind them! The crazed woman could remember that she had vowed to go somewhere, but that was all. She could not stop—she urged Simoom on, now in one direction, now retracing her steps, for hour after hour.

Broken sentences fell from her lips. Her burning eyes roved here and there—she seemed looking for something which constantly eluded her.

Then the old feeling of faintness crept over her, and with a faint remembrance of what had passed, she buckled the stout strap around her body and tied it to the high pommel of the saddle. The reins fell from her fingers, and her head drooped.

Simoom uttered a low whicker, tossed his head gladly, then turned into a valley that led at right angles. As though he knew that his rider was helpless, he paced steadily and true, though swiftly. Through the valley, into Crooked Valley, past the stone fort at the base of which gaunt wolves were snarling and fighting over many a glistening bone—on past the spring and out upon the level, sandy plain paced the good horse, knowing that he was going home to his loved master.

On and on as though his limbs would never tire sped the blood bay, and at length the distant walls of Fort Western are visible. With a sharp neigh, Simoom stretches out in a long, sweeping stride. The woman lifts her head with a start and low cry of wonder. She

notices the fort—she sees a crowd of men collected; and a bright light—the light of returning reason—fills her eyes. She knew now what she had been seeking for!

She saw the puff of smoke—heard the heavy report—and as one man fell to the earth, Simoom utters a shrill neigh and plunges on, only pausing when his hoofs graze the side of his fallen master!

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DEAD PAST REVIVED.

SIMOOM paused short beside his one-time master, and bent his neck until his velvet muzzle almost touched the white, rigid face. But the eager whimper met with no response.

Martha Bascom, as though awaking from a dream, stared wildly around her, pushing back the heavy masses of gray-streaked hair from her bandaged face. She shivered from head to foot as her gaze rested upon the face of Colonel Markham, who, recognizing the horse, was eagerly advancing, a wild hope of hearing something definite concerning his lost child filling his heart.

"The man is dead!" repeated Doctor Hurlbutt, and raising the blanket from the coffin, he covered the blood-stained form. But his words, spoken so close beside her, attracted Martha Bascom's attention, and for the first time she noticed the face of the corpse. A low, wailing cry parted her lips, she covered her face as though to shut out some dread object, and it seemed as though the leather strap alone kept her from falling to the earth.

"The body is yours, Comstock—take charge of it," and as he spoke the surgeon grasped Simoom by the bridle and forced him back from the coffin.

This movement brought them face to face with Colonel Markham. Martha Bascom bent her head until it was level with the soldier's face. Her voice was low, and she spoke quietly; yet each word was like the deliberate planting of a bullet.

"The curse of the past is working, Alfred Markham! You laughed me to scorn, then—it is my turn now. Only for you, my master, my father might now be alive. That loss was my punishment—yonder is yours! Down upon your knees, man, and pray for the soul of John Markham—of your son, whom you have murdered!"

"A lie—he was no son of mine!" gasped Markham, yet the ghastly pallor that overspread his face told how near his heart the arrow was planted. "Who are you—I don't—"

A low, mocking laugh interrupted him.

"A change, is there not? Yet once—bah! the past is dead! Enough that your son lies there—dead, his life cut short by your hand. See!—the blood! it wells up—it spreads—it bears witness to God!"

"A fit—make way!" cried Dr. Hurlbutt, excitedly, as the woman's head fell back, a bloody froth oozing through her tightly-clenched teeth.

Cutting the strap that bound her to the pommel, the surgeon called a couple of men, and with their aid bore the woman into the fort. Colonel Markham had turned toward the body of the man whom he had doomed to death—the body of his own son, if Martha Bascom spoke true. It was false—it must be false! And yet it required greater courage in him to resolve to remove the blanket, to satisfy his doubts, than would have led him to the mouth of a cannon.

But Bill Comstock crouched beside the body of his friend, one hand resting upon the blood-stained blanket, the other grasping a cocked revolver. There was a fierce, hunted look in his eyes, and his voice sounded harsh and unnatural as he snarled, rather than spoke:

"You've did your bloody work, Colonel Markham. They ain't nothin' more you kin hurt. Go your way afore the devil that's in me gits the upper han'—go your way, an' pray to God that your trail won't never ag'in cross that o' Bill Comstock!"

"You heard what that woman said? I must see—if he is my—my son," muttered the officer, his fingers nervously playing with a coat-button.

"Lay one finger on that blanket, an' I'll kill you," said Comstock, in a low, deadly tone. "What he was in life don't matter to nobody. Afore he died, he give me his body. He told me beforehand what I was to do, an' sure as thar's a God lookin' down on us, I'll kill the man as tries to cross me in kerryin' out his wishes! Big a man as you be, you cain't tetch this body, an' live. I most wish you'd try! only I know he wouldn't like it. Go! ef you ain't achin' to die—git away from me. I tell you thar's a bloody devil in me a-callin'—Drive up on this side, Martin," the scout added, as his brother scout drew near, leading a horse and small ambulance.

Like one in a maze, Colonel Markham stood watching the two men as they lifted the body and placed it in the ambulance. The coffin followed, then Martin took the horse by the bridle and moved slowly away. Comstock, with drawn pistol, walked behind, with many a backward glance, as a lion sometimes reluctantly leaves its prey. A shrill neigh—then Simoom started in pursuit, falling into line; and thus the

strange funeral cortège disappeared amid the darkening shadows.

Lieutenant Blake advanced and addressed the colonel. Markham started like one just awakening from a dream, brushed his hand quickly across his face as though he could thus banish the black memories that thronged his brain, and muttered a brief reply—what, he knew not, and turning, he strode toward the fort, swiftly, yet with the uncertain step of a man who has been drinking.

"The woman is better, and has been asking for you, colonel," said Dr. Hurlbutt, meeting him at the gates. "She must have endured frightful sufferings—I would give much to know her whole history!"

"Is—is her mind clear?" hesitated Markham.

"As yours, my dear sir; that is, for the present. She has had fits of insanity, and more than once; she will have another—and she will never live through it. She begged me to send for you. There is something weighing upon her mind. With that removed, she may live on for months; otherwise, she will never see another sunset."

"Where is she?"

"In my quarters. I couldn't take her to the hospital. Shall I tell her you will come?"

Colonel Markham signed for him to lead the way. Obeying, the surgeon paused inside only long enough to give his patient a draught of cordial, then, bowing gravely, he closed the door behind him.

"There was a time when I did not have to send for you, Alfred," uttered Martha Bascom, in a low but clear voice. "You stare at me—I am so changed, then? Through all the long, weary years that have gone by, I knew your face at the first glance, Alfred. Look at me once more—you can remember what I once was, when you knew me as Martha Bogarth—"

A strange cry parted the soldier's lips. The woman smiled.

"I tell you true, Alfred. I am the little Martha to whom you taught the first lesson of life. The finger of time has touched me heavier than you; but that does not matter. I did not send for you to weary you with complaints of vanished beauty. I have something more important—"

"Some other time—I don't think I can bear your reproaches now, Martha," said the soldier, hoarsely.

"Some other time! have I so much longer to live? No, Alfred Markham, we are only sure of the present. I know that I have only a short time to live—and I must clear my soul as far as confession of sin can."

"The sin was mine—not yours," muttered Markham.

"The first—yes. I was innocent and pure at heart as an infant, when you first met me, Alfred. And yet—I cannot regret those days—so happy, my God! It was like a glimpse of heaven—the only heaven there is for such as I! But never mind. I know that you did love me, then. And I—you were my god! Then you went away—I read your letter—and I went mad. There was a baby—and when my reason returned, they said I killed it. I do not know. If so, it was for the best. It died before its cheek could learn to flush with shame at its mother's name.

"Alfred—it is hard to say what I must; and yet I cannot die with my sin untold. Turn your face away, I can tell it better, then."

Colonel Markham sank into a chair, and Martha Bascom turned heavily in bed, so that her face was hidden from the light. She spoke quickly, as though fearing to allow herself time to reflect upon what she was saying.

"I followed you to the city. You were living with your wife, and—her child. You must remember the time, for soon after I found you, you received a note—a note that I wrote but did not sign. The words it contained were false—a deliberate lie. The woman they accused of sin was pure as an angel. I knew that; but you loved her—had left me for her, and that was enough. I believe my mind was crazed, even then."

"That note was followed by others. They accused your wife of betraying you—of loving another. The proofs that I gave were false, though so cunningly contrived that you believed them."

"I had an accomplice—a man who loved me well, at that time. He was rude and ignorant, and when I promised to marry him he agreed to help me in my plans. You saw him, once, if you remember: he was in disguise, then. That was when you found him with your wife."

"In compliance with my plans, you agreed to tell her that business would call you away from town for several nights. Instead, you disguised yourself and remained in readiness for my summons. You did not have to wait long. Accompanied by a witness you drove to the house I had named, forced your way up-stairs and found her—your wife—in a private chamber, with a man. With a curse you struck her down—would have killed her, only for your friend. The stranger escaped."

That man was my friend. I sent your wife word that you were fatally wounded—she fell into the trap. She was held, by force in, that

chamber until you came. As God hears me, she was innocent as the child unborn!"

A heartrending groan broke from the man's lips, and he sunk upon his knees beside the bed. The woman continued, her voice even and steady, though her whole form quivered with strong emotion:

"Your wife fled, that same night, taking her child with her. You sued for a divorce, and obtained it. Your friend bore willing evidence, and she never appeared to contest the decree. You sought far and wide for the child, but in vain. They were with me, for years, and after that I kept track of their whereabouts.

"I married—and then my punishment began. My father and my mother died—died of broken hearts. They never held up their heads after my disgrace. From that day I went to the bad. How could I help it? Their faces were ever before me—day and night—waking or dreaming! I could hear their prayers for their erring child—I can hear them now—they ring in my ears like the knell of fate! I can see them—God of mercy! look!" and Martha Bascom started up in bed, a maniacal fire in her eyes, her finger pointed at vacancy.

"Father—mother—do not look so angry! I could not help it—the devil urged me on—he would not give me time to reflect. Pity me—mercy—you are killing me!"

A wild burst of hysterical laughter followed until, exhausted, the woman fell back upon the bed. Dr. Hurlbutt entered hastily and bent over her. Her eyes opened, but the light of reason was gone, to return only for a moment before death.

"Tell him—his daughter—Black Hollow—dead—"

Then Dr. Hurlbutt gently drew the sheet over the face of the dead.

CHAPTER XXX. NIGHT RANGING.

THE breath of the runner came hot and quickly; his chest rose and fell like the working of a human bellows; the perspiration streamed down his face, over his broad breast, blurring and blending the fantastic devices of a bird, beast and reptile; but though his limbs were aching, his brain throbbing, Leapah pressed on with a courage that conquered fatigue, his eyes fixed upon a faint spiral of smoke—so faint that only a trained eye on the look-out for precisely that signal could have distinguished that from the light, fleecy clouds beyond. As a spur lends renewed fire to a generous courser, so this tiny smoke-wreath caused the Indian runner's strides to lengthen and quicken. Straight on until a narrow, secluded valley opened before him, a valley that, to a casual glance, seemed unoccupied by living man or beast. But Leapah knew better. He dropped into a walk, and only his glistening skin and the mingled pigments told of his long, hard race. His eyes swept rapidly around, then he strode across the valley and paused before a low line of trees and shrubbery.

The leafy screen parted and the White Sioux stepped forth, his eyes asking a question to which the Indian scout made prompt reply.

"My father said—'Go find where the pale-faced squaw of the fort is hidden.' Leapah has obeyed. Where the river runs through the mountain—where the bad spirits dwell—there Leapah found her. She is a captive among the white skins who follow Strong Arm—"

"The dog who sold poisoned fire-water to the Sioux! It is well. The wolves shall gnaw his bones," and, his eyes glowing hotly, the White Sioux uttered a sharp cry.

As though by magic the valley was filled with armed and mounted warriors, their faces painted for war. With a celerity that would have shamed many a well-drilled company of soldiers, the dusky troop wheeled into a double line, before the great chief. He raised his hand—all was still, even the wild mustangs stood as though turned to stone.

"My children! I see blood in the air—white scalps that lay ripe for our knives! Leapah, my son of the swift foot and true—Leapah has hunted Strong Arm to his hole. He heard him laugh and call the children of the Sioux cowards. He said they are squaws—they are afraid of bad spirits, and dare not come where I live. But he lied. We will go and take his scalp. I will lead the way—and my children will follow me."

There was no reply in words, but as one man the red-skinned warriors raised their weapons and shook them in the air. The White Sioux smiled grimly, then blew a sharp note through his fingers. With a joyous whimper his big horse burst through the bushes and paused beside him. The White Sioux vaulted into the saddle and slowly rode along the line, his eye keenly scrutinizing each horseman as he passed by. The result seemed satisfactory, for he waved his hand and trotted rapidly up the valley. The warriors fell into line, riding in double file close upon his footsteps, the red beams of the western sun reflecting from their weapons and barbaric ornaments.

The White Sioux seemed to need no guide. He led the way without pause or hesitation, even when the day gave place to twilight, when

twilight deepened into night. Not a word was spoken, only the steady trampling of hundreds of hoofs broke the stillness of that rocky, sterile waste.

Steadily the war-party pressed on, now walking their animals where the trail was unusually difficult, now trotting, again breaking into a long, swift gallop that rapidly devoured space. The hours passed by. The moon arose and cast a weird light over the night rangers. His face showing stern and rigid in the white light, the chief sped on at the head of his braves. The wild ride recalled that of a few days since, when his mad race ended barely in time for his lips to receive the last breath of his Indian wife. And as he recalled that tragic scene, he urged on his horse as though trying to flee from his own thoughts.

When the party drew near to Black Hollow, the White Sioux slackened his speed, and sent several trusty braves on in advance, following at a more deliberate pace. But the precaution proved needless. The path was clear. Doubtless the outlaws were fast locked in slumber, trusting to the natural defenses of their retreat.

The Indians rode up close to the mouth of the tunnel, knowing that the roaring of the waters would effectually smother any sound they might make. On foot the White Sioux crept forward and entered the arch. Though the intense darkness baffled all vision, the sense of touch told him that an attempt to surprise the outlaws by means of this passage would be worse than folly unless the adventurers were thoroughly acquainted with the perilous trail—which he nor his were.

Slowly retreating, he summoned several of his more prominent braves by name, and withdrew out of ear-shot.

"Strong Arm is like the gopher; he has two holes to his retreat. When he hears us coming in by one, he will run out at the other."

"If both holes are large enough for him, they are large enough for a Sioux brave," uttered one of the party.

"Blackbird has an old head; he speaks what I have thought," said the White Sioux, and his voice sounded colder than customary. "We will stop up one hole and hunt the gopher through the other. Leapah, the right to strike the first blow is yours. You will take two-thirds of the braves and lead them around the mountain to the upper pass. Ride swift and hard that you may have darkness enough to hide your coming from the white snakes. Leave your horses and steal upon the enemy—let your knives and tomahawks be the first to tell them that death is upon them. Then strike hard and sure!"

"But first—to you I give this duty. The white squaw must not be hurt. Find her lodge, and secure her first. Caution your braves as you ride along. He who brings her to me, safe and uninjured, shall be the richest among the whole Sioux tribes. Go now—you know your duty. Choose the best horses, and leave a hot trail behind you."

"One word, chief," spoke the brave called Blackbird.

"Well?" and the White Sioux spoke impatiently.

"I am to ride with Leapah?"

"No. You are wanted here."

Proud of his being selected for such an important mission, Leapah lost little time in choosing his braves, taking two-thirds of the one hundred warriors. Mounted upon the freshest horses of the herd, he led his band through the night.

Blackbird, after his sharp denial by the chief, turned aside and squatted down beside a man who was lying near the water's edge. They conversed earnestly in low, guarded tones.

The White Sioux glided past them, and they were silent. He paused for a moment, his eye fixed upon Blackbird, but finally passed on without speaking. A few minutes later he returned, but the two figures had vanished. He peered keenly around, then hastily passed through his lines. But his search was in vain. Neither of the men were to be found. He leaned against a rock in silence. Whatever his suspicions might have been, he did not give them open utterance.

An hour of silent waiting rolled by. Then the White Sioux gave a start, springing suddenly into full life and action. Faint and indistinct, there came to his ear the regular tramping of a horse's hoofs in rapid gallop.

A low hiss parted his lips. Three braves, each coiling his lasso as he ran, darted away through the gloom. Motionless as graven images the remainder of the Sioux awaited the result. They heard the patter sound abruptly cease, and knew that the rider had been arrested. A few moments passed—then the three braves returned, accompanied by horse and rider.

The White Sioux started forward as he recognized his daughter.

"Eunora! what does this mean—"

"There is danger—the soldiers are coming!" panted the maiden, clinging to the arm of her parent, weak from fatigue.

The chief drew her to one side. He knew that his voice was unsteady, and cared not to

have his braves look upon him when he was weak.

"Tell me all—what have you learned? Why did not Emanthea bring me the tidings?"

"He was gone—I dared not wait," and between her panting sobs Eunora told her story.

Their spy at the fort—a lame half-breed—brought her the tidings. Martha Bascom had spoken of Black Hollow, just before she died, and Colonel Markham, as a last hope, resolved to seek his child there. He was to ride forth at dusk, to avoid observation in case there were spies lurking near. The half-breed stole away at the first opportunity and told Eunora. She, fearing for her father, mounted her horse and rode hard in hopes of finding him at the valley, but was too late. She pressed on, at full speed, accomplishing her mission as described.

The White Sioux pressed one kiss upon her brow, and bade her await his return. He selected several braves whose prowess he could trust, and giving them careful instructions, dispatched them to watch for the coming of the enemy. This precaution taken, he returned to Eu-

nora. "Though there was really no need of your coming, little one, your thoughtfulness of my welfare is very dear to me," he said, in a low, affectionate tone that sounded strangely from one of his merciless reputation. "Come—I must place you where you will be in safety."

He found her a secure retreat among the rocks, and then awaited the result. The delay was but brief. One of the scouts soon returned. The soldiers were near, had only paused to send a scout ahead to see if the way was clear. Bidding his daughter remain perfectly still, the White Sioux stole away to where his braves were placed in ambush along the trail the soldiers must follow in order to reach the mouth of the tunnel.

The scout was suffered to pass and repass unharmed, nor did he so much as suspect that nearly two score deadly foes lay within half that number of yards, as he trotted past them to make his report that the trail was open.

A brief period of suspense, then came the dull trampling of many hoofs. Through the faint, indistinct light of approaching dawn, the body of soldiers became visible.

And then—wild and piercing rose the war-cry of the White Sioux. A blinding flash—a withering volley—and the air was filled with shrieks of pain, groans and cries of horror!

CHAPTER XXXI.

EVENTS IN BLACK HOLLOW.

WHEN Kate Markham lost her foothold and was swept away from the side of her companion in her intended flight, she had scarcely time to realize her peril when the swift current whirled her into the tunnel—her head struck with terrific force against a rock, and she knew no more for many a long hour. Yet her life was spared, and perhaps the more certainly that she was so early disabled. borne through the arched passage, bruised against the sunken rocks that still, as by a miracle, spared her life, the unconscious maiden was tossed into a whirling eddy a few rods below the mouth of the tunnel. The waters swept her against the bank, and her long hair caught upon a projecting snag. Obeying the circling pool, her limbs swung around until the partially submerged log held her fast, her head raised above the bubbling waters.

It was thus that Baby Tom found her, and in silence, almost reverently, the outlaws bore their senseless burden back to the huts in Black Hollow, where a middle-aged Indian squaw, the wife of one of the men, took charge of the body. The giant hung around, nervously impatient, until he received the squaw's verdict that Kate was alive—was not very seriously injured. Not until then did he seem to think of his wife. Doubtfully the man whose pistol-shot had given the alarm, made his report. By the brief glare of his pistol, he had recognized the white face of Martha Bascom, and though feeling himself blameless under the circumstances, he drew a long breath of relief when Baby Tom cursed—not him but the missing woman. Immediate search was made for her body, along the little river, but in vain. And then Baby Tom celebrated his freedom by getting gloriously drunk!

For hours Kate Markham lay like one dead, merely breathing, but the Indian woman never seemed to doubt the ultimate success of her administrations. During those two days, while life and death were so silently contending for the possession of his captive, Baby Tom did a vast deal of sober thinking. The words he had spoken in jest to Kate during their flight from Crooked Valley, now fairly haunted him. The obstacle that then existed was removed. Now there was only the will of a feeble girl between him and a pretty wife, a rich father-in-law, a life of ease and comfort for the future. Might it not be? He plucked thoughtfully at his tawny beard, his big blue eyes filled with a strangely softened light.

At the end of the two days, a haggard, miserable looking wretch crawled up to the mouth of

the tunnel, and after many a painful effort, succeeded in making himself heard. And thus Ben Watson came home!

By snatches, and broken by many a painful gasp, he told his story. How he had deceived the soldiers, how he had stolen away under cover of the rain-storm; how he had remained hidden during the hot and persistent search, more than once peering out upon the men as they ranged almost within arm's-length of his covert, until the quest was abandoned as hopeless. Then wounded, unarmed, without food or the means of procuring any, how he had dragged his heavy limbs over the long, weary trail, suffering a thousand deaths before he reached the end.

And after Watson came, Baby Tom thought harder and more persistently than ever, but making slight progress.

The end—the result to be accomplished, stood out clear and plain enough; but the preliminary details as he attempted to shape them, sent his heavy brain whirling and reeling, until he felt like a drunken man. And one day Ben Watson, whom plenty of food and repose had wonderfully restored, fairly bewildered Baby Tom by broaching the very subject that had so long puzzled the giant's wits.

"Thar's only one way you kin make things sure, now, boss—marry the gal. Do it up in style—no slop-work, but the clean, ginevine article! It kin be did, now the old woman is out o' the way. Take her critter—back to Laramie—git the chaplain to double ye up. Then strike the old man, her pap, fer somethin' heavy. He cain't well hang his own son-in-law, you see."

"She wouldn't have me," muttered the giant, his face glowing hotly, his big eyes sinking before the cat-like gaze of his comrade.

"She mought do wuss. Fine ladies like her think a heap of honor. Say the word, an' I'll agree to settle the case. Ten minutes' talk'll be enough. I'll skeer her into sayin' yes—"

"You say one crooked wor' to her, Ben Watson, an' I'll cut your heart out!" said Baby Tom, with deliberate emphasis, a blazing devil in his eyes.

The decoy uttered a low, long-drawn whistle, but dropped the subject. But his words still rung in Baby Tom's ears. They haunted him by night, and furnished him with food for thought during the long, dull days that crept so slowly by while Kate Markham lay struggling with death. And when the crisis came and passed, and the Indian nurse told Baby Tom that her patient would be perfectly restored within the week, he entered the little hut one afternoon, and motioning the squaw to withdraw, squatted down beside the low pallet of blankets and skins. One glance showed him that Kate was awake. Then he averted his head, staring steadily at a bloated spider at work in the corner, and like a school-boy "speaking his piece," unburdened his mind.

"Mebbe you hain't forgot what I said to you, t'other day when we was ridin' over here. I said I was thinkin' powerfully of making you my wife. I was jokin', then, 'cause I was already married. But things is changed now. She's dead—Marthy, I mean. An' the boys is growlin' 'cause we've run so much risk an' got nothin' to show for it. Your pap won't pay us money. The boys think we're runnin' too much risk in keepin' you here—"

"Set me free—return me to my friends and you shall have money!" eagerly interrupted Kate, her pale face flushing with hope.

"The boys won't agree. They say you'll p'int 'em out. The soldiers'd hunt 'em down an' kill 'em like dogs. They say better fer you to go under then them. They say 't'd save trouble if we putt you in the river. They say you cain't never go out o' this hole alive unless you're so bound to us that you won't dare split. They say there's a preacher man over to Laramie. Tain't so fur to ride. They say ef you 'gree to do that, they'll let you go back to your pap."

"I don't understand you," faltered Kate, but the flush of hope faded from her cheek, and a look of terror filled her eyes.

"The boys say that thar's only one here as has hed any 'sperience in reg'lar, sure-enough marriage," continued Baby Tom, his big eyes never moving from the bloated spider. "That man hed a wife, but she's gone dead. I won't speak no names, but you was long o' her when she was shot an' drowned. The boys say you must marry that man, ef you ever keer 'bout seein' your folks ag'in. They said fer me to tell ye. They said he'd try to make you a good husband. He's a rough cuss; I won't gainsay that, but the boys said mebbe you'd try to git along with him ruther than the river. They said you could hev ontel to-morrow to think it over. An'—that's all they said, I think," and Baby Tom arose, still staring at the bloated spider. "I jest thought I'd tell ye, seein' the boys was so sot on it. The water's colder, sence the rain, I think. You don't look overly strong, an' it might give you a cold—the river, I mean. An' that fool man—he loves you harder'n a mule kin kick down-hill!" With which words, spoken in a tone far different from the one in which the others were uttered, Baby Tom strode from the

hut, leaving Kate to herself and her troubled reflections.

The afternoon faded, the stars began to peer down into Black Hollow as though anxious to read the secrets of its gloomy depths. The outlaws cooked and ate their supper, smoked their pipes and then crawled into their rude huts or stretched themselves out beside the cheerful fires, to sleep—the last sleep that they were to know in this world.

The hours rolled on. The moon climbed the mountain-side and looked down into Black Hollow. Did its full orb observe that dim, phantom-like figure so silently creeping through the bushes, into the clearing?

The faint light of the dying embers were reflected from a bronze, shining skin, nude from the waist upward.

Crouching low to the ground, the shadow stole from hut to hut, pausing for a brief space by each, entering more than one, as if in search of some particular object. And as a half-burned brand broke in twain, its ruddy glow revealed the shape of an Indian, bending over the form of Baby Tom, who was muttering restlessly in his sleep. A long knife hung over the outlaw's heart, but his mutterings ceased and his life was spared, for that moment.

The shadow crept on and paused beside the hut in which lay Kate Markham. Through the brush door came a tiny ray of light. Nodding over the dying fire crouched the Indian woman.

Gently the door was pulled open, not the faintest sound betraying the action. Then, at a low hiss, a second figure appeared, and the twain crept into the hut. The new-comer crouched behind the squaw. The first, passed on to the pallet where lay the maiden, sleeping. A slight motion of his hand—and each shadow grasped its prey. There was a brief, almost noiseless struggle.

Kate's eyes opened, but a firm hand was upon her lips, and, before she could realize her peril, a soft gag was forced into her mouth. She tried to shriek—but in vain; and then her brain reeled. She had fainted.

The Indian caught her up in his arms and turned toward the door. The squaw lay helpless, bound and gagged. The man who had secured her glided to the door. All was still. The outlaws lay sleeping, little suspecting the strange drama that was being enacted in their very midst.

In silence the bold abductors stepped over the prostrate bodies, crossed the clearing, gained the river and forded it without an accident or mishap.

The shadow whose arms were free, fumbled around in the dark for a few moments, then silently placed the end of a stout raw-hide rope in the hand of his companion, and began climbing up the steep hillside, at the very point where Martha Bascom had made the attempt, days before. When the lasso was drawn taut, the man who bore the senseless maiden upon his left arm began climbing up, aided by the rope, until he gained the point where his comrade stood.

Twice was this repeated, and the twinkling stars above seemed to be growing nearer, and the roaring of the waters below to recede. But then, when only a few feet of the lasso hung below his hand, when he felt the moist earth crumbling beneath his feet, and the entire weight of himself and that of the maiden depended upon the grasp of one hand, a frightful peril menaced the Indian. A sharp hiss startled him. Two glistening diamond-like eyes suddenly appeared just above his head. And then a cold, clammy substance touched his hand. A low, peculiar skirr sounded in his ears. And he knew that a rattlesnake was preparing for its fatal stroke!

"Blackbird!" came a cautious whisper from above.

As though startled by the sound, the serpent crawled along his hand and its head rested upon the Indian's neck, its angry hiss filling his ear!

CHAPTER XXXII.

FOUND AND LOST.

HIGH above the roaring of the little river, whirling through the arched passage, reverberating from point to point of the pine-clad mountain, rung the echoes of that withering volley, of the shrieks and groans of the fallen, the exultant yells of the ambushed savages—and high above all pealed forth the wild war-cry of the terrible White Sioux!

Baby Tom sprung to his feet, thoroughly awakened, as the ringing yell filled the valley. He glared around him, fearfully, and even made one stride toward the friendly bushes, so great was the dread with which that wild slogan inspired him. The friendly darkness covered his ghastly face, his trembling limbs and starting eyeballs. For the moment he was utterly unmanned by the remembrance of a past crime and its solemnly-promised punishment.

"It's Injuns an' soldiers!" exclaimed Ben Watson, so close beside him that the giant started. "Ef they'll only chaw each other up! I reckon we'll hev to git out o' this—"

"You think they're after us?"

"Sartin! What fer else would them pesky critters be so fur from the fort?" snarled the decoy.

"You git the boys together—tell 'em to pack up whatever they keer 'bout takin' along," said Baby Tom, once more himself. "I'll go take a squint at these critters, an' fix the trail so they can't come in on our backs. Tell 'em to keep cool—but make haste!"

Baby Tom crossed the river and entered the tunnel, holding a drawn knife before him as a guard against a possible surprise from some intrepid enemy, threading the narrow, perilous trail, though in inky darkness, with a sure and confident foot. Cautiously he peered out, and through the faint gray light of the dawning day, he could distinguish a mass of writhing, struggling humanity close locked in a death-grapple. There were flashing revolvers, though these were but seldom used; the fight was too close and deadly for anything like deliberation; the cold steel was doing its work, instead.

The giant's eyes sought for one particular form, and the manner in which he fingered his revolver shadowed forth the deadly wish that filled his heart.

"Jest fer one minnit!" he muttered, as he peered through the gray mist. "Jest one glimpse, an' I'd be a free man ag'in!"

He listened for the voice of the White Sioux, but it was silent. If he could only know that the man whom he so feared was dead! And yet he dared not step forth to ascertain—he dared linger no longer, and turning, he retraced his steps for a few yards.

Pausing here, he crouched down and slipping his fingers into a deep crack, threw his whole strength into one effort, tearing a section of the ledge from its position and toppling it over into the water. For full six feet the trail was completely destroyed.

"Let 'em try to come in now!" he chuckled, arising and resuming his progress. "Ef he'd only try, fust!"

During his absence Ben Watson had not been idle. Several fires had been rekindled, and the little clearing was now fully illuminated. The outlaws were hurrying to and fro, preparing their loads for a hasty flight by the upper pass. Ben Watson reached Baby Tom's side and hastily muttered:

"Promise to give me half you make, an' I'll help you give the boys the slip. 'Twon't be hard—they're skeered hafe out o' thar boots as 'tis. How is it—quick!"

"Good enough! come—we'll git the gal, an' make a break. Ef only those devils hain't thought o' sendin' round to the upper pass!"

Catching up a blazing brand, Baby Tom sprung to the hut where he had left his captive, and flung open the brush door. One glance—and he stood like one petrified. Ben Watson dodged under his extended arm. He saw the bound and gagged form of the Indian woman—but no more. The girl for whose possession they had dared and suffered so much, was gone!

"Whar is she?" he snarled, whirling around with bared knife threatening the stupified giant. "You've run her off to cheat me out o' my rights! Tell me whar she is, or I'll cut your heart—"

The air was filled with a series of yells, blood-curdling and awe-inspiring; the ringing war-whoop of the merciless Sioux! And through the line of shrubbery burst the painted horde, led by tall Leapah, whose revolver rung out the death-knell of a brawny outlaw as he sprung within the circle of light.

This sight seemed to break the spell which had fallen upon Baby Tom when he found that his prize had vanished, and with a loud, bellowing roar of encouragement to his men and defiance to his enemies, he dropped the torch, drew his pistol and sprung into the thickest of the melee.

Great as was their numerical superiority, the Sioux fell back before this human avalanche, who seemed to court death as a pastime, and with a show of returning courage, the outlaws began to fight for their lives.

Twice Baby Tom snapped his revolvers, and each time they failed him, having been thoroughly wetted when he destroyed the trail through the tunnel. With an angry curse he flung them at the heads of the savages, and snatching up a heavy, blazing log from the nearest fire, whirled it above his head and brought it down with terrific force full upon the shaven crown of Leapah. Without a groan the young chief fell, his skull crushed out of all semblance to humanity. Again and again the ponderous weapon was whirled aloft and each time it descended, there death followed. With every stroke the giant gave vent to a dull, heavy roar of fierce hatred. He seemed like an avenging colossus—like some horrible machine of destruction rather than a simple mortal, and the bravest of the Sioux warriors shrunk from before him, though plying their weapons deftly from behind. With knife, tomahawk and pistol they sought to avenge the fall of their leader, but turning to flee whenever the raging giant faced toward them.

Blood flowed in streams from a dozen wounds, and the movements of Baby Tom grew less swift and certain. He began to stagger—the

wild light in his big eyes to dim, and when his lips parted to emit that sullen roar, a bloody froth fell upon his long beard and swelling chest.

And then—he stumbled and fell upon his knees. With fiercely exultant yells the dusky warriors hurled themselves upon him, plying knives and hatchets with demoniac rage. But even in death the lion is dangerous.

Shaking off his assailants as a buffalo bull scatters the cowardly coyotes, Baby Tom arose. His huge hands grasped an Indian by the throat. That terrible gripe lasted but a single moment; then the Indian was flung aside, with broken neck, and the giant made a blind rush toward another enemy.

His limbs failed him. He flung back his head, and tried to shout forth his defiance, but the hot blood choked his utterance, and he sunk heavily to the ground. Once more the Indians sprang upon him, but the wounds their weapons inflicted, he never felt.

Baby Tom was dead.

At the first alarm Ben Watson had turned to flee, but to do so he must cross the clearing in the very face of the Indians. Before he could turn to crawl into the thicket, Baby Tom made his impetuous charge, and, despite himself, the decoy felt that he must watch the result. It was as though a spell bound him. He could not turn his eyes from the raging giant. Through every change, every movement of that horrible yet strangely fascinating tragedy, his eyes were glued upon the giant, nor could he turn to flee, though he knew that to remain was almost certain death.

When the brief struggle was over, he crept along the line of bushes, hoping to escape from the clearing and reach the trail leading to the upper pass, unseen, but he was doomed to disappointment.

A dark form leaped from the water upon the bank, with a low, grating cry of fierce joy.

"I've got ye this time!" and Bill Comstock clutched the decoy by the throat.

The two men fell to the ground, struggling fiercely. A brawny Indian, who had been in pursuit of the fugitive outlaw, stumbled over them with a loud grunt, the shock forcing the blood-dripping tomahawk from his hand, as well as separating the two foes.

Ben Watson rolled swiftly over toward the river bank. Comstock sprung erect with a yell of anger, only to be confronted by the Sioux warrior, whose strong arms immediately encircled the body of the scout with crushing force. There was no time for explanation. A moment's delay might insure the escape of the decoy, and knowing this, Bill managed to draw the knife from his belt. Though clasped too closely for dealing a sure blow, the scout managed to place his knife against the Indian's side, and then pressed it home to its very haft. Death-stricken, the savage released his grasp, and was hurled fiercely aside.

One swift glance showed Watson just springing into the river, evidently intending to ford it and seek concealment among the dense shrubbery upon the further wall of the valley. Comstock gave one mighty leap and landed just behind Watson in the river. The decoy made a fierce, backward thrust, and Bill felt the keen steel entering his side with a pang like death. But not even death should cheat him of his prey. Flinging himself forward he grappled with the outlaw, pinning both arms to his side so that he was unable to use his knife.

The death that stared him in the face lent Watson strength and courage, and right desperately he struggled. It was fighting against fate. He was helpless in the grasp of an enemy whose advantage could only be annulled by death itself.

The current beat fiercely against them. The rocks beneath their feet were covered with slime. Then—as though despairing of escape—Watson flung his body backward, and both men fell at full length. The roaring waters swiftly whirled them into the black tunnel, where death lurked upon every side.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

PLACING implicit confidence in his scout, who had returned and reported that the way was clear and open, Colonel Markham led his men squarely into the trap set for him by the White Sioux, suspecting nothing until that ringing whoop filled the air—until rifle and pistol united in one withering volley, mowing down horse and rider in one hideous swath. And without giving the ambushed soldiers time for breath, the White Sioux led his braves to the charge, and white men and red joined in a fierce, merciless death-grapple.

High above the devilish clamor rung the voice of the White Sioux, and bold though he undeniably was, Colonel Markham shuddered as he heard the words commanding the savages to capture, not slay him. Right well he knew what that foreboded, and as the tall form of the white

Indian slowly fought its way toward him, he emptied the chambers of one revolver in swift succession, and as his dreaded foe staggered back and fell, a hoarse shout of triumph broke from his lips.

With the fall of their chief, the Sioux braves seemed to lose a portion of their fire and impetuosity, and the soldiers, with a united effort, succeeded in cutting their way through the toils. For a few moments it bade fair to become a hot retreat, for the deadly surprise had greatly magnified the numbers of their foes, but dashing through the crowd of fugitives, Colonel Markham succeeded in rallying them. Even in that hour of intense excitement, the thought of his daughter outweighed all else.

Ten minutes later the party was collected near the foot of the steep rock-wall, the officers consulting upon the best course for them to pursue. The council was of brief duration. Dull and muffled, yet unmistakable, there came the sound of fighting—Leapah's assault upon the outlaws in Black Hollow. For one instant the soldiers listened, breathlessly. Then Dr. Hurlbut spoke, pointing to the rock-strewn space before them.

"The question is settled for us, gentlemen!"

Leaping from cover to cover numerous dusky forms could be distinguished by the growing daylight. In order to leave their present position, the whites would have to run the gauntlet of more than a score of rifles. A single glance showed Markham that, though his force was still the strongest, numerically, owing to the advantage of cover, any attempt to break through that line would be little short of suicide. There was but one chance for them, and that was promptly embraced.

"Dismount and form a corral with the horses!" he shouted, setting the example.

The animals were securely bound, two and two, in the form of a half-circle, either end resting against the perpendicular rock. A taunting yell came from the Sioux, and stealing closer, a few of the braves opened fire upon the living barricade. Two horses fell, then another, their dying struggles threatening to stampede the remainder.

Colonel Markham called several of his men by name and directed them to try and silence the savage marksmen, while the remainder, under his lead, began loosening the gravelly soil with their sabers and throwing it up in the form of a breastwork.

The sun peeped over the hilltop, and found all busily engaged. The Indians were still keeping up a galling fire, though as yet their bullets had found no nobler victims than a half-score horses. The soldiers still labored at the trench, now making quite a respectable appearance, for, as the horses fell, they were promptly lassoed and dragged into position to form a part of the breastwork.

There came no further sound from Black Hollow, and Colonel Markham feared the worst. Strange as it may appear, though, when dying, Martha Bascom had spoken of Kate's being at Black Hollow—and dead—he believed the one part, while ignoring the other. He felt that his child was alive—but now, he feared, in the hands of the ruthless Sioux. He flung his whole powers into the work, and performed more than any two men under his command, but he could not smother that sickening fear.

Suddenly the scattered shots from the enemy became a long, rolling fusilade, and believing that this covered some important movement, Colonel Markham called to his men to cease work and stand ready to repel a charge. But not an Indian could be seen, and their positions were only indicated by the sharp puffs of blue smoke as their rifles were discharged.

One soldier pitched heavily forward, dead ere he touched the earth, shot through the brain. Another staggered back and rolled into the trench, with a sharp cry. Dr. Hurlbut was beside him in an instant, forgetting all else in his professional zeal. This last man was Walt Obermeyer, one of the survivors of the fierce and sanguinary struggle at the stone fort in Crooked Valley.

Warned by this loss, Colonel Markham ordered his men into the trench, where they would at least be partially covered. As for himself, he seemed unconscious of danger, and stood beside his big white war-horse, seeking in vain for an enemy upon whom he might avenge the death of his soldiers.

As suddenly as it had opened, the fusilade ceased, and all was still without. Only for the rising clouds of hazy smoke, there was nothing to betray the presence of an enemy.

Gradually the soldiers resumed their labors and continued them until quite noon, with only one interruption. As he stood watching, a sharp exclamation escaped the colonel's lips. A strong force of Indians were riding rapidly up the valley, but drew rein as a footman ran swiftly toward them. There appeared to be a brief interchange of words, then the new-comers dismounted, tethered their horses and disappeared among the bushes and bowlders. Breathlessly Colonel Markham eyed them, looking for, yet dreading to recognize his idolized daughter among them; but in vain. If there, she was kept hidden from his gaze.

"Better if we had charged them at first," muttered the surgeon, at Markham's elbow. "They outnumber us three to one now, with every advantage of position."

"How many men have we—fit for work?"

"Thirty-one, all told. Obermeyer is hard hit—dying, I fear," replied the surgeon.

Markham stared moodily before him. The prospect was black, indeed, and he could see no way out of the toils.

"We can only wait and sell our lives as dearly as possible," he said, after a pause. "There's not enough horses to mount us all. We must fight the bloodhounds until help comes from the fort. Blake may grow uneasy at our prolonged absence, and send out a scout." But it was plain that the colonel had little hope of this possibility ever coming to pass.

"Look! what on earth—a white flag, by Jupiter!" exclaimed Hurlbut, pointing to where a white cloth was moving to and fro above a black boulder.

"It may be a trick, but you may as well answer it. At any rate there will be so much time gained. Give me your handkerchief—mine is red. Now go and see that the men are ready for anything that may turn up."

While hurriedly speaking, Markham was knotting the doctor's handkerchief upon the point of his saber. Lifting his arm, he answered the signal. Immediately a man arose from behind the black boulder, and bearing the flag of truce, boldly advanced toward the barricade. Markham started sharply, and his florid countenance turned ashy white. In the being before him he recognized the man whom he believed he had slain—his deadliest foe—the White Sioux!

With a violent effort he mastered his emotions enough to cry aloud, in a hoarse, unnatural voice:

"Halt! you are near enough. What is your wish?"

"You are Colonel Westley Markham!" came the words, clear and cold. "Good! and I am Leroy Temple!"

"A cashiered officer—a deserter—a murderer, traitor and renegade! You do well to cover your head with a flag of truce!"

"There is one title you have forgotten," and the White Sioux laughed, metallically. "I am an avenger, as well as the rest. But let that pass. I did not come here to bandy epithets with you, but to offer you terms for the lives of your men."

"Proceed; you are growing quite interesting," sneered Markham.

"I have just seventy-two braves, fit for service, under my command, at present. You can see for yourself that their rifles command your position, and a very little reflection will show you that, if I say the word, they can pick you off one by one, without running the slightest risk themselves."

"If this is so—which I deny—why are you taking so much trouble? Why come here and beg for what is your own? Bah! your statements are contradictory."

"You wish to know why? That is easy told. A chance bullet might cut you off—and I am not ready for you to die—yet."

Slowly these words were enunciated, and with such a deep, intense malignity that the soldier's heart grew cold as he listened. Right well he knew the meaning of his enemy. But his voice was steady when he replied:

"What terms do you offer?"

"The life of one man for those of a score. Your men are at liberty to depart, but they must first surrender you into my hands," was the prompt response.

"You shall take your answer straight from the lips of my men," and Markham laughed, shortly. "You have heard, boys; you are free to ride away, if you will only give me over to that fellow. Speak out—and speak freely!"

One loud yell of derision arose. Markham smiled grimly as he again faced the White Sioux.

"You have your answer. Go back to your red-skinned dogs and say that we dare them to come and take us!"

The White Sioux made no answer in words, but waved the flag of truce high above his head. As though by magic a slender figure appeared upon the black boulder—the figure of a white girl—of Kate Markham, her arms stretched appealingly toward the spot where her parent stood. A bitter groan broke from the soldier's lips as he recognized his child, and realized how helpless he was to aid her.

"Man—devil!" he gasped. "Release her—let her go free, unharmed, and I will surrender—murder me, if you will, but spare her!"

"Your men may go free, but your life and her life belong to me!" coldly uttered the chief. "Those are the only conditions I can offer. What white blood I have shed has been in the attempt to capture you. My hour has come at last, and you are helpless. I give you until sunset to decide. If you do not surrender yourself then, yonder girl will be bound to the rock upon which she stands, and burned to death!"

Without another word the White Sioux turned and strode rapidly toward his braves.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE DEAD ALIVE.

WITH the angry hissing of the venomous serpent filling his ear—with the cold, clammy coil resting upon his bare neck and shoulder—with the soft point of earth crumbling beneath his feet, leaving him suspended by one arm, while the unconscious maiden hung across the other—there seemed no escape for the Sioux brave.

Again, and in louder tones, came the wondering call from above, but Blackbird dared make no reply. He felt that the serpent was in readiness to strike—that the faintest sound, the slightest motion, would hasten the venomous blow. Those few moments were ages of horrible torture. The warrior who had stood face to face with death a hundred times, now turned sick at heart.

"What in thunder's the matter down thar?" repeated the voice from above, and the tightly-stretched lasso was shaken impatiently.

The shock was too much for the cramped and stiffening fingers of Blackbird, and he slipped from his precarious foothold, falling swiftly several feet before he could check his descent. His foot struck against a small point of rock, and this, added to the knowledge that almost certain death awaited him below, lent him the strength necessary to check their fall. The shock came so suddenly that the rattlesnake was flung from Blackbird's neck before it could use its deadly fangs.

He heard the angry skirr below him, and firmly clutching the lasso, he called to his companion to draw him up. Though slowly, this was accomplished without further accident, and then Blackbird sunk down upon the narrow edge breathless, almost fainting after his silent but awful struggle against death.

In silence, though evidently not a little puzzled, his comrade bent over him for a few moments, then turned to the unconscious maiden lying at his side, and removed the gag from her mouth, though holding his broad palm in readiness to smother any outcry she might attempt.

A moment later came the muffled but unmistakable sound of firing and wild yells from beyond the eastern rock of wall. Blackbird sat up, echoing back the cry of astonishment that broke from the lips of his comrade.

"It's from the outside—mebbe it's the boys from the fort, got wind o' this hole—they've run chuck into a hornets' nest!"

"Hist! those hounds are awakened below! Not a word—listen!" muttered Blackbird.

The sounds of fighting grew fainter and less distinct until the busy hum from the outlaws' camp below was the only sound that rose above the brawling of the impetuous river. The camp-fires were blazing up brightly, and the movements of the excited outlaws were distinctly visible to the two men.

"What kin be keepin' them red-skins?" impatiently muttered the white man. "Lord! what a clean sweep they could make, now! Look—quick! by the big fire—it's that Ben Watson, by the Eternal!"

Without another word, Bill Comstock—for the reader has already recognized him—grasped the lasso and slid down the hillside, just as Leapah, the Sioux, broke cover and struck his foe.

With breathless interest Blackbird watched the struggle that followed, his eyes riveted upon the huge form of Baby Tom, his heart beating quick as he drank in every detail of the terrific death-struggle which ended in the fall of the giant. As the dying gladiator fell, an unconscious sigh parted his lips, and was answered by a low, gasping cry close beside him. Kate Markham had recovered her consciousness.

Blackbird quickly but gently placed his hand over her lips, hurriedly muttering:

"For the love of God, lady, do not scream! our lives depend upon your prudence!"

The red light from below penetrated the shrubbery and was reflected from his rude and bronzed form. A look of sickening despair filled the maiden's eyes. Blackbird read the meaning of that expression, and spoke quickly:

"I am a friend, Miss Markham—I risked my life to rescue you from the hands of those ruffians. I do not wonder at your failing to recognize me in this disguise. Surely you can trust me—I am Happy Jack, your friend!"

When John Markham—or Happy Jack, as he was far better known—held out his hands to Lieutenant Blake for the manacles—when he was led forth to die the death of a convicted murderer—when he made his last request of Colonel Markham, that after death his body might be handed over to Bill Comstock for burial—when he stood beside his coffin and bade the file of soldiers send their bullets home to his heart—when he bade Dr. Hurlbut, as a final message, to proclaim that he died with his soul unstained by the crime for which he had been condemned—up to that moment Happy Jack had composed his mind for death. He believed it to be inevitable—and yet he lived.

All the time he had spent in schooling himself to meet death as a brave and innocent man should, true and faithful friends were working steadily and deliberately for his life. Prominent among these was Dr. Hurlbut and Sergeant Bowen. Believing him innocent, despite

the overwhelming if circumstantial evidence, the moment sentence was pronounced, they began maturing their plans. Every precaution was observed. Not even Bill Comstock was taken into their confidence at first. They knew he could not keep the secret from Happy Jack, and they feared that, if he knew what they intended, he would refuse to play his part.

Not until a few hours before that appointed for the execution, did Comstock have the glad tidings imparted to him. On pretense of taking him along while he went to "cuss the old man," Dr. Hurlbut led him away from the guard-house and told him all, keeping a close watch over him lest he should betray the plot in his insane joy. But Bill proved himself a discreet coadjutor. Having full confidence in Martin, the scout, he enlisted his services, and together they rigged up a condemned ambulance, in which to carry off the pretended corpse.

Sergeant Bowen, to whom fell the duty of preparing the firing party, did his work well. It was not hard work to select men who were ready to run the necessary risk, for Happy Jack was an almost universal favorite. Even those who believed he had slain Stone, grumbled at the death sentence being passed upon a man who had rid the army of a dangerous nuisance.

The sergeant was far too old a soldier to fall into the error of having his men load with *blank* cartridges. He knew that, even in the excitement of an execution, any practiced ear could easily detect the wide difference between a blank cartridge and one fired with a ball. Selecting reliable, steady-nerved men, he gave them orders to load regularly, but to aim so that their bullets would just miss the scout, upon the left. By so doing, even the sharpest-eyed spectators, seeing the dust raised by the balls, could not tell that they had not passed through the scout's body, instead of past, owing to their position.

The reader will remember that Dr. Hurlbut spoke a few rapid words to Happy Jack as he stood beside the coffin, which produced a marked difference in the man's demeanor. Those words told him what was about to be done, and bade him remember that on his acquiescence rested the fate of his friends, as well.

"Live to solve the mystery of Stone's murder—live to clear your own name!" concluded the surgeon, stepping aside.

The volley was fired. Happy Jack fell as though dead. Stooping over him Dr. Hurlbut emptied a small bottle of blood inside the scout's shirt, slipping the bottle into his own breast, then arose and pronounced the man dead. It was to prevent a too close scrutiny that he flung the blanket over the prostrate figure, the moment he felt that the spreading blood was noticed; and this dread also accounted for the desperate manner in which Bill Comstock guarded the supposed corpse from even the eyes of the dazed and conscience-stricken father.

In the ambulance Happy Jack was conveyed to the valley where Eunora was waiting. Then came her part. By her advice Happy Jack allowed himself to be disguised as an Indian. Then she led him to her father, telling him that these two men were those who had preserved her honor, if not life. Assuming the name of Blackbird, Happy Jack accompanied the Sioux to Black Hollow, resolved to rescue Kate—his half-sister—if mortal man could. Stealing away, after his rebuff by the White Sioux, he and Comstock scaled the hill and entered Black Hollow, with the result stated.

All this the scout told Kate, as they occupied the niche together, concealing nothing.

"I could not bear that you should think me dead, or guilty of this crime," he added. "I swear by the soul of my dead mother that I am innocent! That is all I care to live for now—I mean—" and he paused, abruptly.

"I do believe you—I know you could not be so wicked," said Kate, softly. "But it is so strange! I never knew that I had a brother living. And yet—when I first saw you, I felt drawn toward you—it must have been the voice of Nature—"

"And I to you," interrupted Jack, his voice not so steady as usual. "But with me it was different—I said in my heart that it would be like heaven to gain one look of love from those eyes—"

At this moment the sharp crack of a rifle sounded from below, and a bullet sunk into the hill just above their heads. A loud voice came to their ears, and, glancing downward, Happy Jack discovered several dusky forms staring upward, threatening him with leveled rifles. Thoroughly conversant with the Sioux tongue, the scout had no difficulty in comprehending the summons. He was threatened with instant death unless he descended at once. A single glance showed him that escape was impossible. The niche was not deep enough to protect their bodies from rifle-shots below. Covered by the shrubbery, the Sioux could pick him off without running the slightest risk themselves.

"We must descend—but trust to me. I will contrive to baffle them, yet. Remember—I am a stranger—a Sioux warrior, to you. Be silent, but brave-hearted."

Happy Jack assisted Kate down the hill, and

joined the Sioux. At first they looked suspiciously upon him, but he recalled the words of their chief, offering a large reward to the brave who should fetch him the white squaw.

"We will share the reward," he said, laughing.

CHAPTER XXXV.

EUNORA AND KATE.

CLOSELY as Happy Jack watched for an opportunity to give his red-skinned companions the slip, during their long and roundabout ride, he was disappointed. The Sioux braves evidently placed little confidence in his sudden conversion from enmity to friendship, and there was never a moment but what one or more rifle muzzles covered the scout's person.

It required all his self-control to keep from flying at the throat of the White Sioux, when the chief coldly gave his orders for the disposition of Kate Markham, in case his first proposition to the besieged should be rejected. His half-formed resolve was not overlooked by the renegade, and in a cold though not unfriendly tone the chief spoke to him.

"Don't tempt me to forget that I owe you a great debt, my friend. Not only am I grateful for the service you rendered my daughter, but I respect you as a brave, true-hearted enemy. But if my own children were to stand in the path of my just vengeance, by the mother that bore them! I would strike them down with my own hand! If you are wise," he added, in a hard tone, "if you are wise, you will withdraw and not mingle in this matter."

Happy Jack turned away, but not in simple obedience to the White Sioux. He caught a glimpse of a trim form and rarely beautiful face through the leafy boughs beyond—he saw a little brown hand timidly beckon to him; and hoping that Eunora, despite her passionate love for her father, could suggest some plan for liberating Kate, he obeyed the summons.

Following the silently-flitting figure, Happy Jack at length came up with Eunora beside the river-bank, where a luxuriant wild grape-vine festooned a small clump of saplings. The Indian girl looked full into his eyes for a moment, with an intentness far different from her usual demeanor while in his company, then spoke:

"What is that white girl to you?"

"She is my sister," the scout replied, promptly enough, though in evident surprise. "That is, her father is my father, though our mothers were not the same."

"I thought—I was afraid—" and Eunora drooped her eyes, the hot blood mantling her rich cheeks.

"She is my sister, and very dear to my heart. Your father has called me his friend—he says he is grateful because I was once your friend in danger; yet he holds my sister captive, and says that she must die. When that hour comes, I, too, will die—but not alone. There will be many black faces among the Sioux."

"Then Eunora will die, too," softly uttered the Indian maid.

Long before this day, the handsome scout had learned that Eunora loved him, and more than once he had caught himself vaguely picturing a lifetime of wild simplicity in company with her. But never since he first met with Kate. Though she was his sister, one look at her fair, proud face told him that there were higher and nobler walks in life than the one he was almost unconsciously gliding into; that the life of a scout and Indian-fighter was not what his dead mother would have wished him to follow.

There was no attempt at concealment in the lustrous eyes of Eunora as they met his. She loved, and was proud of her love. Happy Jack saw this, and though he felt a sharp pang of compunction, he resolved to make use of this love as the last hope of preserving Kate.

"No—you must live—the sun would lose its light were Eunora to die," he said, softly. "We are both too young to think of dying, while there remains a single ray of hope. If I can steal my white sister away, Eunora must go too. There will be room in our lodge for three. The days will be long and bright, and our love will make them pass like a dream—"

"Ef them 'ar don't fetch her heart plum up to her mouth, then it's made o' putty—that's all!" and the legs of a man protruded through the leafy mass above, and their owner dropped lightly to the ground.

"Bill!" exclaimed Happy Jack, astonished.

"Nothin' shorter!" grinned the scout. "Savvy, miss! Sorry to spile your pritty talk, pard, but them durned vines give way afore I could think o' knockin' to let ye know I was comin'. But ef I heard ary word you said, hope may die!"

"Never mind; I'm glad to meet you on any terms. I've been wondering what on earth had become of you."

"I jist tuck a flyin' trip through purgatory—did so! Talk about chain lightnin'! ef a canon kin spit a feller out any quicker then that durned derrick spirted us two through yender hole, then you needn't ever use me fer gun-wad-din'—not much!"

"You two? Did you pass through—"

"Waal, I should re-mark! Ef I hedn't swallowed so much water that I run aground, I'd 'a' bin to Orleans afore sun-u!"

Comstock seemed in an unusually loquacious mood, but a few adroit questions soon extracted the pith of his adventures. He and Ben Watson, tightly locked in each other's arms, were swept through the tunnel at frightful speed, and drawn into the same eddy from which Baby Tom had drawn Kate Markham, some days before. Though bruised and breathless, Comstock managed to crawl ashore, still holding his prey; but when he recovered a little, to his dismay he found that Ben Watson was dead—his skull horribly crushed where it had come into contact with a sunken rock. Believing that some of the Sioux had seen him strike down the Indian in Black Hollow, he dared not attempt to rejoin them, and feeling too crippled to scale the hill again to rejoin his friend, he sought refuge among the grape-vines, to wait for darkness to cover his movements.

In return Happy Jack informed Comstock of all that had occurred since their parting, and pictured the peril that threatened Kate, in vivid colors. Drawing close together, the trio earnestly discussed the situation and sought to devise some plan for rescuing the maiden.

"If there was only more time—if we could only have this night to work in!" muttered Happy Jack. "It is a slim chance, but if all else fails, I will try to carry her off by a dash, on Simoom!"

"That would be certain death," interposed Eunora. "If she only knew that we were trying to aid her—but she will be watched closely. I could not get to speak—"

"Could you give her a note—a word of writing?"

"Perhaps—I will try. It must be small—just a word. Scratch it upon a leaf. Tell her to make believe faint—to be very ill. If she can play a part, I think I can manage the rest. Let me think—" mused Eunora.

Smothering his anxiety, as best he could, Happy Jack scratched the words indicated upon a small, smooth leaf, and waited. In a few moments the Indian girl lifted her head and spoke:

"You must watch me closely, but be prudent. If I can manage, as I hope, there will be little danger. When I make a motion—so, you must lead your horse down to drink. You will be watched, it is likely. Let him drink, then lead him back, slowly, as close to me as possible. When I give you the sign, place her upon your horse and flee for life."

"Ef 'twas me, I know mighty well which critter I'd run away with!" muttered Comstock, with what sounded very like a sigh, as Eunora, bearing the talking-leaf, turned and glided away from the natural arbor.

"She is a noble girl—God bless her!" said Happy Jack, earnestly. "But you, Bill—I'm afraid you'll have to lay low until dark. If I succeed in carrying off my sister, this will be like a hornets' nest, sure!"

"Nor they won't be no Injun gals fool enough to try to git me out o' trouble, nuther," laughed Bill, but with an evident effort. The bright eyes of Eunora had touched his heart deeply. "You never mind me; you'll hev your han's full with her. Ef you do git her cl'ar, what next? You Cain't sca'cely take her to the fort—"

Happy Jack made no reply, for an Indian was seen approaching, and Comstock quickly crawled up into his former hiding-place, while his friend passed through and then rounded the clump as though just coming from the river.

Putting on a mask of moody unconcern, the scout slowly returned to the broken ground where the Indians kept guard over the entrenched soldiers, though the truce was rigidly observed, otherwise. Taking a position where he could overlook the boulder, beneath which, bound hand and foot, Kate sat, he awaited the denouement of Eunora's plans.

She was conversing earnestly with the White Sioux, and then finally passed before the captive. Eunora seemed scrutinizing her closely and curiously, then, with a little laugh, she turned away. As she did so, the leaf dropped, face up, upon Kate's lap, and the significant words met her astonished eyes. For an instant she seemed puzzled—then Eunora cast back a swift, meaning glance, and Kate knew that there was some scheme afoot for her relief.

A few moments later she fell upon her side, with a gasping, gurgling cry, and when Eunora and her father hastened back, the captive lay rigid, her face distorted, blood tinging her lips, like one in a fit. So well did Kate play her part that for a few moments even Eunora was deceived.

"Help me carry her over yonder. There is no danger. She has only fainted from terror and fatigue," explained the Indian girl.

Covertly Happy Jack watched for the signal. He led his horse to the river, as directed, and saw, to his joy, that he was not followed, though evidently watched.

After a few minutes he began to retrace his steps, pausing every few yards to allow Simoom a mouthful or two of grass, and gradually edging toward Eunora. Now that the crisis was so near, his brain was clear, his nerves as steady as iron. With a careless glance he selected the best course to take, and saw with satisfaction that a dozen of Simoom's bounds would carry them around the rise, where no bullet could touch them.

Eunora made the agreed upon signal, then turned her back. Happy Jack led Simoom on—then sprung to Kate's side, and lifting her in his arms, leaped into the saddle and cheered Simoom on, bending low down and shielding Kate with his own body, as angry yells and whistling bullets told that his bold attempt at rescue was discovered.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THROUGH NIGHT TO LIGHT.

"COLONEL," said Dr. Hurlbutt, gently touching the commander upon the shoulder as he sat buried in deep, troubled thought, "Private Obermeyer is sinking fast—dying, in fact. But he says there is something weighing upon his mind that he must get rid of—he asked me to beg you would just step over to him for a moment. From what he let drop, I fancy it concerns the murder of Captain Stone—"

Colonel Markham visibly winced at these words. Though he had stubbornly strove to hide his real emotions, the knowledge that he had condemned his own son to die a shameful death was bitter, indeed. Arising, he followed the surgeon to where the dying soldier lay.

"The colonel is here, Walt," said Hurlbutt, and the man's eyes opened with a wild, half-dazed stare. "Tell him what you have to say. Put it short and clear, for your name will soon be called, and you'll be off duty forever!"

"You needn't go, Doc," gasped Obermeyer, painfully. "I can tell you easier than him, though I didn't know, until too late, how hard I was hitting him. Let me confess to you—but let him listen. It's about that black day—Happy Jack was innocent—I shot Captain Lawrence Stone!"

Though his first words had in a measure prepared them for this, Obermeyer's confession exasperated sharp, indignant exclamations from both Markham and Hurlbutt. But the dying man attempted no apology. In feeble, broken sentences, he made a full confession, clearing up every doubtful point, leaving not the shadow of a doubt remaining in the minds of his hearers—for now the other soldiers had drawn around him—as to the utter innocence of Happy Jack.

The substance of his story may be condensed into a few lines. Several years before, Obermeyer had been a private in Captain Stone's company, and by some means had fallen into the ill graces of the petty tyrant, who managed to make the soldier's life a perfect hell on earth, until he finally deserted, and enlisted in another regiment, knowing that, if discovered, this re-enlistment would render his punishment lighter. But then Captain Stone himself was transferred to that very regiment, and though he did not appear to recognize Obermeyer, the soldier knew that this could only be a matter of time. He was right. Discovery came on that afternoon when he, in company with Stone, was searching for the lost trail. Yet even then he had no idea of committing murder to save himself. He fell to the rear—then the temptation came. Captain Stone discovered Ben Watson, and called upon him to surrender, but the outlaw raised his pistol to shoot. At that moment Obermeyer was standing beside a huge mass of rock—unconscious that Happy Jack was directly opposite, with only the boulder separating them. He saw Captain Stone about to fire, and believing he could throw the burden of guilt upon the shoulders of the outlaw, he raised his pistol and discharged the fatal shot. At the very same instant Happy Jack fired at Watson, but his bullet missed, as the outlaw fell, wounded by the captain's ball. Obermeyer saw the scout leap forward, and hastily retreated, only coming up when he saw the others draw near. His agency was never suspected, and through love of life he suffered events to take their course, and another man to undergo the punishment he alone deserved.

There was a dead silence after Obermeyer concluded his confession, for all saw that he was fast dying. Only for that, he would have fared ill at the hands of the soldiers; not because he had killed Lawrence Stone, but for the death—as they believed—of Happy Jack.

Colonel Markham looked like a man who had just listened to his own death sentence—crushed and broken down. The surgeon, relenting, was about to make his confession, when a wild tumult arose among the Sioux. Though the besieged little suspected it, this was caused by the bold rescue of Kate Markham by Happy Jack.

"Lie close, boys!" shouted Hurlbutt, and right well it was that the men promptly obeyed, for with a rattling volley, the savages, led by the White Sioux, broke cover and impetuously charged upon the breastwork.

Stern and deadly work ensued. Rapidly the rifles and pistols of the soldiers vomited forth their contents, but steadily the Indians charged, though leaving some of their number at every step. Right up to the breastwork they charged—and then came the hot work hand to hand.

The White Sioux raged like a very fiend of battle. But while his heavy saber dealt death on every side, his shrill voice was heard above the frightful din, warning his braves to spare the life of Colonel Markham, though they slew all others.

The soldiers were terribly outnumbered, and

though they fought as only men can who know that they must conquer or die, there could scarcely be a doubt as to the ultimate ending of that unequal conflict. One by one were they falling, dead or dying. The bloodthirsty Sioux were pressing them hardly, hemming them in until there was scant room to swing a saber. All seemed lost, when—

A ringing cheer rent the air, and two-score horsemen, led by Happy Jack upon his gallant Simoom, thundered around the curve and plunged into the *melee*. With a hoarse yell of fury, the White Sioux leaped upon Markham and plunged his knife to the hilt in his bosom—the next moment being fairly spitted upon the sword of Lieutenant Blake.

"Alive? then bring him here," faintly uttered Colonel Markham, as Hurlbutt answered his question concerning the White Sioux.

Fast sinking, yet with mind clear, the white chief was laid beside his mortal enemy, who was preparing to enter upon the same dark trail. Markham feebly raised himself upon one elbow, and after gazing earnestly, sadly, upon the wreck before him, spoke earnestly:

"I have sinned heavily against you, Leroy Temple, and now, in the presence of death, I humbly beg your forgiveness. I have been a hard, cruel man, and yet—I have cared for your child as for my own—more!"

The White Sioux strove to speak, but the hot blood filled his throat. There was a wild, eager look in his eyes that Markham readily interpreted.

"Hear me out. I am dying, and you shall hear nothing but the truth. The story you heard about your wife was not all true—though she did die in giving birth to a child. She was poor and had no near friends. It was easy work for me. I had her buried. I hired the people to tell you that both she and her child had died. But it lived. I carried it away, and had it raised and educated as my own daughter. In its face I could trace the likeness of her—my God! how I loved her!"

"She lives—your—my daughter? not that one," gasped the White Sioux, but the exertion cost him dear. The black blood burst from his lips and his head fell back a lifeless weight.

"He is dead—God rest his soul!" solemnly pronounced Dr. Hurlbutt, arising.

"Be kind to her, John," faintly whispered the dying soldier. "She has been the light of my life. Hard and cruel as I have been, I might have been even worse only for her gentle influence." Happy Jack and Kate Temple—brother and sister no longer—knelt beside the blood-stained pallet, their hands clasped in his. Feebly, uncertainly Colonel Markham drew their hands together, pressing them down upon his fast-failing heart. And thus they were when the daylight faded; when the stars grew brighter in the great vault overhead; when the round moon arose and cast its silvery sheen over the scene. And the white fingers clasped above theirs grew colder and whiter, and then they knew that they were orphans, indeed.

A few more words, and rest is yours, reader. Martin the scout must be thanked for bringing up the reinforcement in time to change defeat into victory. While out scouting, he espied the war-party of the White Sioux, and stealing close, had heard the words of the chief. Knowing that Colonel Markham intended riding to Black Hollow, he hastened to the fort with his warning, but spraining his ankle he failed to reach there until late at night. No more time was lost, and mounting, the soldiers rode hard, guided by Martin. Just before reaching the spot they met Happy Jack. Placing Kate in a place of safety, he led the charge, with the result already recorded.

Happy Jack had but one more interview with Eunora, the Indian girl. He urged her to make her future home with him and her half-sister, but Eunora firmly refused. She knew that he could only give her a brother's love, and frankly told him the sight of another's filling the place she had hoped to fill, would be worse than death to her. Resisting all persuasions, she returned to her mother's people, with Kenekuk, her brother—who, embittered by his father's death, is now fighting under Sitting Bull.

In due time Happy Jack and Kate were united, and are now living a quiet life upon a Colorado ranch, which the money left by Colonel Markham amply stocked. But, happy as the scout is, there often comes a cloud over his spirits as he thinks of his true-hearted "pard," Bill Comstock, whose presence is alone wanted to complete the measure of his happiness.

Bill Comstock—heart-of-gold! He died in harness, carrying dispatches where no other man dared venture. By whose hand he fell no man but those who murdered him know. When his body was discovered he had been dead for many days.

Though his grave is unmarked and forgotten, few men have a nobler or richer monument than the poor, ill-fated scout. Look into the hearts of all those who ever knew him—there you will find his monument.

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